

SLOVAKIA'S NEXT PRIME MINISTER: MAVERICK OR SAVIOUR?

[Bratislava](#) - Running on an anti-corruption platform, Igor Matovic pulled off a populist, anti-establishment victory. It remains to be seen how 'centrist' his coalition government will be.

Slovakia's parliamentary election delivered a strong and largely expected statement. The brutal murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée two years ago — and revelations that emerged from the subsequent investigation — made the February 29 vote all about defeating the ruling Smer-SD party, which had come to be seen as the embodiment of a corrupt system of crime and impunity.

While Smer-SD's defeat was almost inevitable, the winner was as surprising as it was deserved — Igor Matovic, an unorthodox politician, successful self-made businessman, and a genius of political marketing. With a relentless focus on tackling corruption, and through effective Facebook campaigning, his OLANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) movement captured 25 percent of the vote. Now comes the hard part, as he forms a new coalition to take the country forward and deliver on promises of change and renewal. Five other parties passed the threshold for parliamentary representation. Two will almost certainly be in opposition: Smer-SD and the proto-fascist Kotlebovci-LSNS. Then there are three parties that share with OLANO a desire for change and a more just country, free from corruption: SME rodina (We Are Family), Za ludi (For People), and SaS (Freedom and Solidarity).

Taken together, Matovic and the three like-minded parties have 95 seats, five more than the number required for a constitutional majority. At first sight, it seems the coalition will be more homogenous than expected. The surprise casualty in the election was the PS/Spolu (Progressive Slovakia/Together) coalition, the victors in European Parliamentary elections last year, and the party of President Zuzana Caputova, who was propelled to power in 2019 with her appeal for a just, more consensual and calmer country. PS/Spolu fell short of the threshold by just 926 votes, the smallest margin in Slovak parliamentary history. Their 200,000 voters now join the 815,000 (28.5 percent) who supported parties that did not make the threshold.

In the absence of PS/Spolu, three of the likely coalition partners — OLANO, SME rodina and Za ludi — are centrist, more conservative-leaning or at least have a portion of like-minded politicians in their ranks. The exception is the more liberal SaS, which has a more free-market economic vision and is opposed to state subsidies. Nevertheless, the coalition appears — at least on the surface — to offer a relatively stable prospect. That is not to say there are no bumps — or potential minefields — in the road ahead. Former President Andrej Kiska, leader of Za ludi, has signaled his concerns about the shady history of Boris Kollar, leader of SME rodina, and his alleged associations with several mafia bosses from the 1990s. Given that the coalition owes its success to an anti-corruption platform, Kiska is understandably wary of such a shadow looming over the new government.

Igor Matovic and Slovak President Zuzana Caputova attend a joint news conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, on March 4, 2020. Matovic was officially tasked to form a new government by Caputova. As well as defining itself against the past, the coalition must also come to a common vision for the future. In his first post-election statement, Matovic sounded like a true, inclusive democrat, reflecting on the diversity of the country and the importance of representing all in Slovakia. This stance is seemingly at odds with that of Kollar, a potential Speaker of Parliament, who has previously shared platforms with nationalist, xenophobic and Euroskeptic politicians such as French far-right opposition leader Marine Le Pen, Italian far-right opposition leader Matteo Salvini and

former Austrian far-right leader Heinz-Christian Strache.

The question of how centrist this “centre-right” coalition will be is pressing and complex. Some Slovaks worry that the country may drift towards an illiberal trajectory similar to that of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary or Jarosław Kaczyński’s Poland. *Some Slovaks worry that the country may drift towards an illiberal trajectory similar to that of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary or Jarosław Kaczyński’s Poland.* This notion may seem at odds with Slovakia’s other recent elections (presidential and EU parliamentary), where pro-liberal, human rights-oriented rhetoric won the day, but the reality is more prosaic.

Slovakia is still a Christian country and one of six EU countries that does not allow civil partnerships. Matovic does not appear keen to push the boundaries with his allies or his own deputies to the right in the coalition. He has already indicated that he will allow free votes on “cultural-ethical questions” such as abortion rather than trying to force a joint position from deputies. This “non-party” approach is also likely to be reflected in the introduction of forms of more direct democracy. One of the successes of Matovic’s campaign was an online questionnaire that he promised to incorporate into the government’s manifesto, much to the annoyance of potential coalition partners. He has also shown interest in Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán’s ideas of conducting consultative referenda on questions of national importance.

While the idea of attracting people into public discourse per se might be appealing, when combined with Matovic’s desire to lower the threshold for a referendum to be binding from 50 to 25 percent, it becomes a more dangerous prospect. It remains to be seen whether a populist, anti-establishment victory will be accompanied by a drift to the right and any substantive steps backward. Despite all the positivity and excitement surrounding the triumph of the anti-corruption platform, it would be wrong to expect it to usher in a new, liberal era for the country and one representative of a modern Slovakia. That, however, might be a price Slovaks are prepared to pay for a less corrupt and more just country.

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