

Slovakian presidential election won by non-aligned millionaire

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Andrej Kiska, a politically non-aligned millionaire, won the March 29 presidential election in Slovakia. Obtaining 59.4 percent of the vote, he received almost 20 percent more than his Social Democratic competitor, Robert Fico. In the process, Kiska replaced Ivan Gasparovic, who, under Slovakia's constitution, was not permitted to stand again after two terms in office.

Born in 1963, Kiska is the first Slovakian head of state who did not emerge from the Communist Party. He has not previously been active in politics and is considered politically inexperienced. He made his millions with financial firms in the 1990s, offering customers dubious loan deals. In 2005, he sold his company shares to a bank for several million euros.

Kiska has been presented ever since as a philanthropist. He jointly established the "Good Angels" foundation, which supports families with sick children. He presented himself in the election campaign as a spokesman for the divided right wing, railing against corruption and the inefficient justice system. He complained about the poor state of the education and health systems, linking this with calls for further privatisation and market involvement.

Apart from this, Kiska's campaign was limited to hollow phrases. In his victory speech, he said he wished to "establish the trust of the people in the presidency" and "make politics more human." He added that he would be president for all Slovaks and would "work to unify and motivate the people so that we can be proud of our country."

In Slovakia, as in Germany, the president's role is generally that of a figurehead. However, he can exert influence on the government through his power to veto legislation.

Although there were few programmatic differences between Kiska and Fico, Kiska's election could

increase political tensions. Fico stood for head of state in order to consolidate the power of his social democratic Smer-SD.

In spite of Fico's pro-European stance and willingness to implement dictates from Brussels, there are foreign policy differences between him and the European Union (EU). In the course of the Ukraine crisis, Fico has avoided publicly criticising Russia too strongly.

The EU requires Slovakian support to assist Ukraine with gas supplies by means of "reverse flow." Important oil and gas pipelines that would be used for this purpose run through the country. Fico, who negotiated a discount for Slovakia on Russian gas in the lead-up to the presidential election, had refused to support these plans. In spite of pressure from Brussels, Fico wanted to avoid an open conflict with Moscow.

Fico headed Slovakia's government between 2006 and 2010. Under that government, an alliance of the social democrats with the conservative HZDS and the extreme right-wing SNS, the country joined the euro zone. Fico imposed draconian austerity measures in all areas of social spending. He cooperated closely with the trade unions to slash pensions and public-sector wages.

With the impact of the economic crisis on Eastern Europe, the Smer-SD has intensified its shift to the right. The Eastern European "tiger," as Slovakia was dubbed due to a growth rate of over 10 percent in 2007, fell apart completely. Economic output fell by 13 percent in 2009.

The bankruptcy of all the established parties provided fertile ground for Kiska's rapid political rise. With voter turnout at just 43 percent, he won support above all in the west of the country, in relatively wealthy areas around the capital Bratislava. Kiska also did well

in electoral districts dominated by the Hungarian minority.

Political commentators view the election result as a verdict on the Smer-SD. The general opinion among observers was that the presidential election was “a referendum on Fico and his government.” The business newspaper *Hospodárske Noviny* commented: “Kiska did not become the favourite through years of hard political work, but rather the exact opposite, the people’s belief that he ‘is clean,’ that he ‘isn’t like the others,’ and ‘doesn’t belong to them.’”

In the previous regional elections, even openly fascist forces profited through their opposition to the established parties. The right-wing extremist Marian Kotliba won the run-off election in the central Slovakian region of Banská Bystrica for chairman of the regional administration. Kotliba received 55 percent of the vote while the previous regional chairman Vladimir Manka from the social democrats got 45 percent. Voter participation was just 25 percent.

Kotliba had called for an exit from the EU and NATO, which he described as a “terrorist organisation,” the reintroduction of the crown as the national currency, preferential treatment for Slovakian investors over foreigners, and balancing the budget by ending foreign interventions by Slovakian soldiers. At the same time, he relied on social demagoguery and spoke out against the privatisation of public companies.

In neighbouring Czech Republic, which was united with Slovakia in a single state until 1992, another super-rich newcomer, billionaire Andrej Babis, achieved unexpected success in last October’s parliamentary elections. Babis’s “Action of Dissatisfied Citizens” (ANO) won 18 percent of the vote.

Babis, the second richest man in the Czech Republic, announced during the election campaign that he intended to run the state like a business. He promised tax cuts and reductions to public spending and social welfare. In the aftermath of the election, the social democratic CSSD, the right-wing conservative KDU/CSL, and Babis’s ANO formed a coalition government.



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