Right-wing social democrat Pellegrini wins presidential election in Slovakia

Markus Salzmann
19 April 2024

Following its success in parliamentary elections in October last year, the camp around Prime Minister Robert Fico has now also recaptured the Slovakian presidency. In the runoff election on April 6, the pro-government candidate Peter Pellegrini clearly prevailed against his opponent from the liberal camp with 53 percent of the vote.

Fico's SMER, which belongs to the social-democratic Socialist International but presents right-wing populist positions, had lost power in 2018 following mass protests against the brutal murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée.

Pellegrini's election success is a distorted expression of the widespread rejection of the war against Russia, which the leading EU powers continue to escalate. With an unusually high voter turnout of 61 percent, 1.4 million Slovaks voted for Pellegrini. Only the first directly elected Slovakian president, Rudolf Schuster, had received more votes in 1999.

In Slovakia, the president has mainly representative duties. However, he can appoint the cabinet as he sees fit, as the current President Zuzana ?aputová did after the fall of Eduard Heger's government last year.

Independent Ivan Kor?ok won the first round of the presidential election in March with around 42 percent of the vote. Pellegrini had 37 percent. During the election campaign, Kor?ok, who ran for the right-wing liberal opposition parties, had promised to form a counterweight to the government of Prime Minister Fico. Politically, the former foreign minister is strictly in favour of the European Union. Kor?ok is in favour of a massive escalation of the war against Russia in Ukraine.

This war is deeply unpopular among the Slovakian population. Inflation rose astronomically during the war. At the end of last year, food prices were still rising by over 30 percent. The effects are particularly noticeable in the east of the country, which is plagued by poverty and unemployment. Pellegrini was far ahead of the other candidates in all border regions with Ukraine.

The result of the far-right former Justice Minister Stefan Harabin, who rejects NATO and is considered to be extremely pro-Russian, is also a distorted expression of the opposition to the war. Harabin achieved over 11 percent of the vote in the first round, although he is discredited as a former associate of Fico.

During the election campaign, Pellegrini deliberately presented himself as an opponent of the war in Ukraine and mixed this with nationalist slogans. "I will never allow Slovakia to be dragged into a war," he declared on Facebook. He promised that no soldiers would be sent to Ukraine under his presidency. "Slovakia will always come first for me," said Pellegrini.

Pellegrini's election victory was met with outrage in Germany and the European Union. The warmongers in Berlin and Brussels are only in favour of "democracy" as long as the electorate votes for candidates they like.

Christian Democrat (CDU) foreign policy expert Norbert Röttgen accused Pellegrini and Fico of openly sympathising with Vladimir Putin. This was just as incompatible with EU membership as the attitude of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who was "Putin's Trojan horse in the EU," he said. "The EU must not and cannot continue to tolerate this," Röttgen told the *Funke Mediengruppe*. Anyone who sided with the aggressor did not belong in the EU.

Green member of the European parliament (MEP) Anton Hofreiter, a notorious warmonger, demanded "that the Slovakian government receive a clear warning signal from Berlin and Brussels." If Fico and Pellegrini "take an axe to the Slovakian rule of law and open the

floodgates to corruption, no more money should flow from EU funds."

Of course, figures like Röttgen and Hofreiter know that Pellegrini and Fico are not going to go too far in their opposition to the EU. Like Hungary, the country is economically dependent on the EU. Röttgen and Hofreiter are reacting so aggressively because their pro-war course is meeting with widespread resistance among the population. They are demanding that the Slovakian government suppress this resistance with all its might instead of adapting to it.

Pellegrini is anything but an opponent of the war. His Hlas party has been in government since October last year together with Fico's Smer and the radical right-wing SNS. Fico won the parliamentary elections with the promise to deliver "no bullets" to Ukraine and to stand up for peace negotiations with Russia.

But these were just empty words. His anti-war rhetoric merely served to disguise his extreme right-wing policies, which have so far been largely accepted with favour in the EU.

At a meeting last week in Bratislava with the Ukrainian head of government Denys Shmyhal, Fico declared his complete support for his neighbour. At a joint press conference, he said, "Russia's use of military force in Ukraine was a blatant violation of international law," adding that Ukraine needed help and solidarity: "We are here to help."

Shmyhal confirmed the political agreement. He praised the "constructive meeting." Slovakia stood "very firmly on the side of Ukraine" and condemned Russian aggression.

Although he had promised during the election campaign that "not a single bullet" would cross the border, Fico also promised further arms deliveries from Slovakian companies. He even tacitly agreed to cooperate in the production of weapons. Slovakian companies are also to be involved in the reconstruction of destroyed Ukrainian infrastructure and a direct train link between the eastern Slovakian city of Košice and the Ukrainian capital Kiev is planned.

After his election victory, Pellegrini also immediately endeavoured to dispel any concerns that he would go against the political will of Brussels and Berlin and said he was firmly committed to NATO and the EU.

The 48 year old is a political pupil of Fico and was prime minister for two years from 2018 to 2020. The split of his party Hlas from Smer was not due to political differences. After Fico came under suspicion of corruption and had to resign following the murder of Kuciak, Pellegrini split with his party in 2020 because he thought he had a better chance.

Fico and Pellegrini both advocate an extreme right-wing policy against refugees and immigrants and are in favour of massively increasing the powers of the state at home and rearming the military, which is to be financed by drastic austerity measures. To this end, 30 percent of costs are to be cut in the country's public sector. In addition, there are to be severe tax increases. The country's budget deficit is expected to rise to 6.3 percent this year.

In order to suppress the opposition at home, the Slovakian government has introduced far-reaching attacks on press freedom and the judicial system, following the Hungarian example. Fico has already replaced the leaders of the police and other authorities. He is also trying to gain complete control over the state media and suppress critical media.