

Voters Have Given Slovakia a Historic Opportunity to Repair its Mistakes

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For the second time in less than a year, Slovakia produced a surprise in Central European politics. Last June, Slovaks voted for anti-corruption lawyer Zuzana Caputova to be their country's first female president. In last weekend's parliamentary elections, they voted out a corrupt system of governance and brought in a new political class that aims to rebuild citizen trust in the state.

Over the last two years, momentum built among citizens for political change. The brutal murder of young investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé in February 2018 sparked a civic outcry against the corrupt links between politicians, oligarchs, judiciary, and the police that Kuciak had uncovered. Slovakia's civil society organized protests on a scale unseen since the 1989 Velvet Revolution, resulting in the resignations of Prime Minister Robert Fico, the minister of interior, and the president of police.

Yet citizens' demands for justice, the rule of law, and state efficiency continued to grow. The investigation into Kuciak's murder, closely watched by journalists, revealed shocking mafia-like practices. Allegations of state corruption and crime became powerful election slogans, combining with clear demands for transparent governance, an independent judiciary, and punishments for abuse of state power.

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This charged climate mobilized Slovaks in the country and abroad and fueled a strong engagement by independent media and civil society. As a result, voter turnout sharply rose to 65.8 percent, the highest in almost two decades. Out of 25 competing parties and movements, six made it into the parliament: Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) led by Igor Matovic scored 25.02 percent, the ruling Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD) 18.29 percent, the center-right We Are Family (Sme rodina) 8.24 percent, the neo-Nazi People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) 7.97 percent, the liberal Freedom and Solidarity 6.22 percent, and former President Andrej Kiska's new party For the People 5.77 percent.

Expectations are that a new center-right and pro-European government will be formed quickly with Matovic as prime minister, consisting of OLaNO, Sme rodina, Freedom and Solidarity, and For the People, giving it a comfortable majority of 95 seats, enough even to amend the constitution. The parliamentary opposition will comprise SMER-SD and LSNS.

For the democratic renewal that Slovaks clearly demand, the central players will be Matovic and OLaNO. Although OLaNO has been in parliament for a decade, observers struggle to characterize it as party or move-

ment, given its composition, structure, and modus operandi. Matovic is just as unconventional, a former businessman and founder of the regionPRESS media company. Only two months ago, the sometimes eccentric leader and his movement of politicians, activists, teachers, businesspeople, actor, investigators and others polled around 5 percent. Nobody, including Matovic, expected this meteoric rise. Yet in the finishing stretch of the electoral race, he showed superb political instinct and communication skills in to fight corruption and “return power to the Slovak people.”

Matovic now has an exceptionally strong mandate. OLaNO defeated ruling SMER-SD party, weakened the LSNS, and gained more seats in the new parliament than its likely three coalition partners together. Matovic seems fully aware that dismantling mafia-like networks, creating an independent judiciary, dealing with serious disputes and divisions over moral and cultural values, facing up to radicalism, addressing reforms of the social, educational and health systems, and fixing foreign policy priorities are a tall order. He and his colleagues have historic opportunity to rectify mistakes of the post-communist transition and to rebuild citizen confidence in the state and its services.

The elections, as much as the presidential one last year, will have broad implications for Slovakia’s political culture, which has been polluted by mistrust in elites and the overall political, economic, and social system. If the new government succeeds, it can prove wrong those in the region and in the broader European and transatlantic space who claim that values, authenticity, and solidarity must capitulate before pragmatism, wealth, manipulation, and radicalism. In so doing, Slovakia can also demonstrate the crucial importance of active citizenship and independent media for reclaiming democracy and the rule of law. In a Central Europe suffering from democratic backsliding, Slovakia may become a much-needed lighthouse.

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