



FRUSTRATION AND HOPE

SLOVAKIA AFTER KUCIAK'S MURDER

Krzysztof Dębiec, Jakub Groszkowski

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THESES

1. The murders of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018 became the catalyst for the civic outrage that has brought about significant changes on the Slovak political scene. This has mainly affected the long-ruling party Smer-SD and its leader Robert Fico, who resigned as prime minister under public pressure. However, the main opposition forces have benefited from the protests to only a small degree, as large sections of society perceive the opposition leaders as unreliable. New political projects have benefited from the social agitation, primarily the Progressive Slovakia party, co-founded by Zuzana Čaputová who won the presidential election in March on a wave of slogans calling for the repair of the state and the restoration of justice. The outgoing President Andrej Kiska is also forming his own political party with a centrist agenda.
2. The investigation into Kuciak's murder contributed to the disclosure and publication of reports about informal links between politicians, business and the criminal underground. This allowed many Slovaks to see the scale of the pathology which has developed in their country during the rule of Smer. However, despite the defeat for Robert Fico's party in the presidential elections, it still tops the polls with about 20% support, as it meets the demand of a large part of society for a sense of security and predictability. For many Slovaks Smer has been a guarantor of economic and social stability, which in recent years Fico has bolstered with his use of strong anti-immigrant rhetoric. Smer also skilfully plays upon ideological questions, and – by rejecting the liberal ideas prevailing in Western European social democracy – has come to play the role of defender of the status quo. There are also the tangible successes which Slovakia has achieved during the rule of Smer: the country has entered the Schengen zone and joined the eurozone, and within that group it can be proud of the good state of its public finances, despite its lavish spending on social policy.

3. For years one of the sources of Smer's success has been the weakness of the centre-right opposition. The opposition is united by its very harsh criticism of Smer and its willingness to draw upon the demands to clean up politics which were raised by the anti-government protests organised after Kuciak's death under the slogan 'For a decent Slovakia' (Za slušné Slovensko). For years, however, the centre-right's main problems have been its fragmentation, personal disputes, and significant policy differences concerning both economic and ideological questions, as well as their varying European agendas. This internal friction has been effectively exploited by Smer, which depicts the opposition as unable to cooperate and discredited by numerous scandals. A prerequisite for removing Smer from power, therefore, is that the opposition parties should at least dispense with the attacks on each other and agree on a pre-election strategy, which the leaders are increasingly beginning to realise. However, this is still a slow process, and is being accompanied by the fragmentation of the political scene due to the creation of new political formations.

4. The classic division between the governing and opposition parties in Slovakia has been affected by a third element: the rise of anti-system forces. These use media outlets spreading disinformation (mainly on the internet), which are popular in Slovakia, and can effectively mobilise the most frustrated voters by offering quick solutions to problems which have existed for years (such as the vast differences in development between the regions, and the social exclusion of the Roma population). These anti-system forces undermine confidence in the state's institutions as well as the EU and NATO, and demand a redefinition of foreign policy under the slogan of 'recovering sovereignty'. In fact, however, their foreign policy demands are largely in line with the narrative coming from the Kremlin. The main representatives of this trend in March presidential elections, Štefan Harabin and Marian Kotleba, received almost a quarter of the votes cast in the first round. In next

year's parliamentary elections, Kotleba's party could win over most of this electorate, as shown by opinion polls which give it up to 14% of popular support.

5. The parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2020 will witness a clash between the three political camps: the ruling party, which consists of rising numbers of conservative social democrats and nationalists; the centre-right and liberal opposition, which is united almost exclusively by its harsh criticism of Fico's party; and the anti-system parties, whose strength is growing despite the country's strong economic performance. The final form of these camps is not a foregone conclusion, however, as their ranks are still being reshuffled. There are many signs that Smer's campaign narrative will be based on a fight to defend its generous social policies as well as the traditional values to which (in their opinion) the opposition poses a threat. For its part, the opposition will stress the need for healing the state, and for those guilty of abuses of power under Smer to be brought to account. The shape of the future government will largely depend on how much support Kotleba's party gets as its power grows, and on whether it will continue to be marginalised on the political scene.

INTRODUCTION

The presidential elections in March 2019 clearly demonstrated the battle lines and the scale of divisions within the Slovak society. The main axis of these divisions is the public's attitude towards the strongest party in the ruling coalition – Smer – sociálna demokracia [Direction – Social Democracy], led by the former Prime Minister Robert Fico, which with one brief interruption (2010-12) has held power in Slovakia since 2006. However, an increasingly important role is being played by the split between supporters of Slovakia's further integration into Western structures and opponents of the pro-Western elites who seek to radically redefine the state's foreign policy under the banner of defending its sovereignty. Taking this into account, Slovak society can be divided into three main groups: those who demand that the discredited elites leave office and that the functioning of the state be improved, though without any major change in foreign policy; those who primarily want stability and are afraid of major changes; and those who want to replace the elites and are demanding radical change to the country's political system and foreign policy.

The proponents of changes, both radical and moderate, consider Smer to be an emanation of the capture of the state by criminal-oligarchic networks, and want new politicians to 'restore Slovakia to its citizens'. The more moderate part of this group of society is represented by the lawyer and social activist Zuzana Čaputová, who won the presidential elections with 58% of the vote; she has come to embody this group's hopes of improving the functioning of the state. Her opponent Maroš Šefčovič, who was supported by Smer (but won just under 42% of the vote in the second round) gained support mainly from people who value political, economic and social stability. Smer meets those expectations because it guarantees stable economic growth and generous social programmes; in addition it has opposed admitting immigrants from Muslim countries, and maintains an ideologically conservative attitude. Most supporters of radical changes did not vote in the

second round of the presidential elections, which resulted in a low overall turnout (under 42 percent). In the first round, however, they supported the anti-system candidates who won a total of 25% of the votes, thanks to their demands for a radical reformulation of Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO, or even to leave these structures altogether. This division into three sections held fast during the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019. The top three places were taken by a coalition of two new opposition parties (including Progressive Slovakia, which Čaputová co-founded), Smer, and Marian Kotleba's anti-system party.

I. THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE POLITICAL CLASS

The murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018 became a catalyst for public outrage which led to significant changes on the Slovak political scene. Most of Kuciak's articles concerned the suspicious ties between politicians and business, which for years had gone untouched by the police and the courts. The main demands of the 'For a decent Slovakia' protests, the biggest the country had seen since 1989, were thus to establish the reasons for the murders, to resolve the scandals which had been uncovered by Kuciak and others, and bring about the resignations of leading politicians. The demonstrations were effective in leading to the resignations of long-time prime minister Robert Fico, his close associate and interior minister Robert Kaliňák, and the chief of police, among others¹.

After these changes, under the influence of strong public pressure and the expectations of Slovakia's foreign partners, investigations into the scandals associated with Smer started to accelerate. As a result, reports began to appear revealing the enormous network of informal links between politics, business and the criminal world which had grown up during Smer's rule.

The businessman accused of ordering the murder, Marián Kočner, had maintained close contacts with important politicians in Smer, key figures in the police and the prosecutor's office, the owners of the influential financial group Penta, and others. He sometimes acted as a business partner for them, but he was mainly a valuable source of incriminating information, which he obtained through cooperation with former agents of the intelligence services, whom he commissioned to spy on politicians

¹ J. Groszkowski, in cooperation with K. Dębiec, 'Początek końca rządu Roberta Ficy' [The beginning of the end of Robert Fico's government], *Analizy OSW*, 14 March 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2018-03-14/poczatek-konca-rzadu-roberta-ficy>.

and journalists. Kočner had remained unpunished until Kuciak's murder thanks to protection from his contacts. Another figure who long enjoyed great freedom of action was the developer Ladislav Bašternák, who in 2018 was convicted of a multimillion-euro tax fraud; he also gained public notoriety when it transpired that Fico had been living in an apartment rented from him since 2012². It is true that for many years the opposition and the media had widely reported the links between Smer politicians and Kočner & Bašternák, as well as many other scandals in which the party was implicated, but nevertheless they did not damage the ruling party's popularity to any great extent.

Fico's party has held an unchallenged lead in the polls for a long time. However, the common belief about the impunity of Smer's business environment has had a clear negative impact on public confidence in the judiciary. Among the EU nations, only the Croats have a more critical view of the independence of their judiciary than the Slovaks. This distrust has been displayed not only by the residents of Bratislava, who tend to favour the current opposition, but also in the eastern regions of Slovakia, whose residents traditionally support Smer to a greater degree³.

² Towards the end of May 2019, the local media reported that the former Prime Minister was to move out of this apartment 'in the next few weeks'; this came after a court decision to announce an auction of Bašternák's properties which have been taken over by the state.

³ The survey carried out in January 2018 (just before Kuciak's murder) for the European Commission's *2018 EU Justice Scoreboard* report shows that only 29% of Slovaks thought their courts were independent, while 58% thought the opposite. Similar results were obtained in a study in January 2019 (28% believe the courts are independent, 60% say the opposite). Slovakia's result was the second-worst in the EU, after Croatia. Slovaks see pressure from politicians as well as business and other interest groups as the main causes for the limited independence of the judiciary. Cf. The European Commission, *The 2018 EU Justice Scoreboard*, Luxembourg 2018: ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/justice_scoreboard_2018_en.pdf; and the European Commission, *The 2019 EU Justice Scoreboard*, Luxembourg 2019: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/justice_scoreboard_2019_en.pdf, and also the source material for the 2018 data: 'Flash Eurobarometer 461: Perceived independence of the national justice systems in the EU among the general public': http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2168_461_ENG and 'Flash Eurobarometer 474:

In spring 2019, intensive work by the police and prosecutors helped the Slovak people to recover their trust in the state institutions (at least partially). Kočner is in custody accused of committing economic crimes and having ordered Kuciak's murder, while Bašternák has been sentenced to five years' imprisonment and the confiscation of property obtained from criminal proceedings. However, for a large part of society, the information disclosed during these investigations is evidence that Smer not only tolerated this criminal state of affairs, but was even jointly responsible for it. EU institutions are also increasingly turning their attention to these matters. Two days before the second round of the presidential elections, the European Parliament even passed a resolution which included an expression of concern about the emerging allegations of "corruption, conflict of interest and impunity" in Slovakia's ruling circles⁴.

For years, Smer's response to accusations of corruption and its opaque links with business has been to attack its political opponents. As a result, public debate in Slovakia largely boils down to mutual accusations of a personal nature from both the opposition and the ruling coalition. When Smer presents materials which compromise their political opponents, they usually contain true information (for example, reports of fraud in the accounts of a company co-owned by the former President Andrej Kiska); this allows it to suggest that the opposition is not free from the pathology of which it accuses the ruling camp.

Perceived independence of the national justice systems in the EU among the general public: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/86022>.

⁴ Cf. European Parliament, 'Situation of rule of law and fight against corruption in the EU, specifically in Malta and Slovakia', 28 March 2019, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2019-0328+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>. Given that the resolution was passed two days before the second round of presidential elections, it was interpreted in the Slovak media as interference in the country's political process, although the resolution itself did not become the subject of any broader public debate.

A side effect of this defensive strategy is the loss of public confidence in the entire political class. Among the party leaders, the least trusted is Robert Fico, who has a negative rating from up to 73% of Slovaks. Yet the leaders of the main opposition parties are not in a much better situation: between 60 and 70% of respondents profess a lack of confidence in them⁵. This distrust of the political class is reflected in electoral participation. The turnout in the second round of the presidential elections (41.8%) was the lowest in history. Regularly less than 50% of those eligible to vote in local elections do so (in 2018 the figure was 48.7%), and fewer than 30% do so in regional polls (the result of almost 30% in 2017 was the highest in history). In elections to the European Parliament the turnout never exceeded 23%, and each time it has been the lowest in the EU⁶.

Against this background, the country's parliamentary elections look relatively good; more than 50% of eligible voters regularly turn out, and in the last ones (2016) the highest figure for twelve years was recorded, at nearly 60 percent.

Lower turnouts favour the anti-system People's Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) of Marian Kotleba, which has a strongly motivated electorate. Slovak society's growing disillusionment in politics as such is also shown by the rising electoral popularity of people from outside politics: after the recent local elections, as many as 42% of communal heads and mayors do not belong to any group

⁵ 'Dôvera/nedôvera k vybraným politikom – jún 2019', Agentúra Focus, 9 May 2018, http://www.focus-research.sk/files/n252_Dovera_nedovera%20k%20vybranym%20politikom_jun%202019.pdf.

⁶ On the one hand, this testifies to Slovak politicians' incapacity to mobilise their electorate on European issues. On the other, as many as 41% of Slovaks believe that the European Parliament should play a smaller role than it does at present (the average figure for the EU-28 is 27%), while 35% think the opposite (the EU average is 48%). Cf. European Parliament, 'Parlemeter 2018–Taking up the challenge: From (silent) support to actual vote', <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge>.

(a rise of 4 percentage points compared to previous elections). This trend can be clearly seen in the big cities, with Bratislava at the forefront; the new mayor is a 40-year-old architect and urban activist. In smaller towns, however, politicians who only formally stand as ‘non-party local government’ candidates in fact maintain the local business-party ties.

II. SMER, OR SLOVAKIA'S 'LITTLE STABILISATION'

Smer, despite recording a marked decline in its popularity since the 2012 parliamentary elections, which it won with a score of 44%, is still the leader in the polls, with the support of about 20% of voters.

This continued high level of Smer's popularity is due in large part to Peter Pellegrini, who replaced Fico as Prime Minister in March 2018. Unlike his predecessor, he operates in a more consensual manner, and has placed greater emphasis on keeping the functioning of the state transparent. As a result, he is the only leading politician who is trusted by more than half of Slovaks. His attitude contrasts with the behaviour of Fico, who has been known for his intemperate language and conflicts with the majority of the press. Meanwhile, tension is rising within Smer between Pellegrini and Fico, who still heads the party; the latter has for several years been looking for a place to spend the rest of his political career (in 2014 he stood in the presidential elections without success, and in 2019 he unsuccessfully attempted to become the head of the Constitutional Court). The rising tensions within Smer became perceptible after the European Parliament elections in May 2019, which saw the party's first losses in a purely party-level national contest since the European elections in 2004⁷. These tensions were expressed in a letter from party activists in Košice, who demanded Fico's resignation as head of Smer, and that the party should be 'cleansed' of the suspicions which have caused it both to lose popularity among the electorate and membership within the party itself. If the current Prime Minister took control of the party, his good personal ratings would help the party regain some voters, but such a change is unlikely, especially before the elections scheduled for spring 2020. As the keystone of various

⁷ Smer's result of just under 16% placed it second behind a coalition made up of the liberal party Progressive Slovakia and the centrist party Together (Spolu), which won just over 20% of votes.

interest groups, Fico has proved again and again that he retains full control of Smer.

Supporters of Smer associate the party with the successes Slovakia has enjoyed during its rule. When Fico was prime minister, Slovakia joined the eurozone and entered the Schengen area, and the vast majority of the population (also thanks to Smer's rhetoric) is still convinced of the benefits of the single European currency and EU membership⁸. Moreover, during the economic crisis, Fico's government conducted a responsible budgetary policy, and when things improved, it spread the wealth around in the form of various social packages (such as free lunches in schools and kindergartens, and free train travel for students and pensioners), while maintaining a relatively small budget deficit (1.04% of GDP in 2017 and 0.7% of GDP in 2018, the lowest in the state's history).

For many Slovaks, then, Smer has been the guarantor of economic and social stability. This image has been boosted by Fico's strong anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is intended to convince a public relatively uncomfortable with people from other cultures that the Smer government will ensure security for the country⁹. Fico has also skilfully played upon ideological issues, presenting himself as the defender of the status quo. Contrary to

⁸ Three-quarters of Slovaks 'agree' with EU membership, and around 80% are satisfied with the ability to use the euro. Cf. 'Súhlas s členstvom SR v EU – apríl 2018', Agentúra Focus, 9 May 2018; http://www.focus-research.sk/files/246_Suhlas%20s%20clenstvom%20SR%20v%20EU_april%202018.pdf; 'Slovenská dekáda s eurem. Lidé si zvykli, osm z deseti to neměnilo', *iDnes.cz*, 17 January 2019, https://www.idnes.cz/ekonomika/zahranicni/euro-slovensko-deset-let-vyroci.A190117_152043_eko-zahranicni_svob.

⁹ According to the report *Discrimination in the EU in 2015* prepared for the European Commission, Slovakia has the lowest proportion in the EU of people who would feel comfortable working with a black person (48%), someone from Asia (49%), a Jew (57%), a Buddhist (51%), and the second lowest (after the Czech Republic) with a Muslim (37%). Cf. *Special Eurobarometer 437-Discrimination in the EU in 2015*, the European Commission, October 2015, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2077>.

the prevailing trends in European social democracy (but in accordance with the will of most of Slovak society), he has rejected the possibility of introducing civil partnerships for same-sex couples (the project was initially proposed by the opposition SaS party, which paradoxically is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists political group) or their adoption of children¹⁰. Moreover, he has announced that the Pellegrini government will not ratify the Istanbul Convention, signed by the previous centre-right coalition, which conservative groups have criticised. At the same time, however, most of Smer's MPs abstained from an attempt in parliament to limit the legal options for performing abortions, which in this regard have remained relatively liberal¹¹.

Ideological matters also played an important role in the presidential election campaign in 2019. Šefčovič, endorsed by Smer, presented himself as a defender of 'traditional values', and attacked Čaputová for her liberal views on moral issues (such as her acceptance of the adoption of children by same-sex couples), in which he was echoed by leading Smer activists. However, the election result showed that this strategy has its limitations. Although Čaputová made no secret of her controversial views, she effectively downplayed their importance, declaring that political changes in such matters require a broad consensus, and were not part of her electoral programme. As a result Čaputová – whose campaign slogans focused on the struggle for an honest and fair Slovakia – attracted not only liberal voters, but also many conservatives as well.

¹⁰ According to a recent survey by the Focus agency (from 2016), 58% of Slovaks were 'strongly against' the possibility of children being adopted by same-sex couples, and another 17% were 'somewhat against': a total of three-quarters of the Slovak public. According to the same survey, 69% of Slovaks were opposed to marriage between persons of the same sex, and 56% were against their civil partnerships.

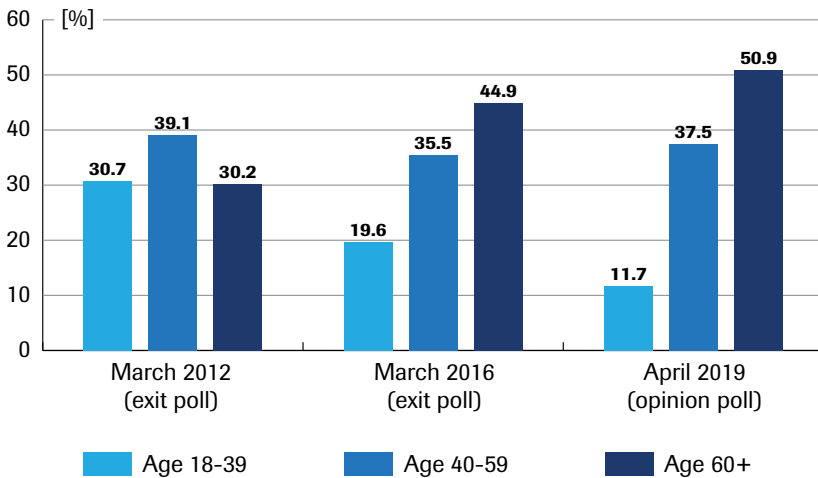
¹¹ In contrast to the Czech Republic, doctors in Slovakia have the right to refuse to perform or assist in abortions. According to a 2018 survey by Focus, similar percentages of Slovaks (47 and 48%) favour maintaining the abortion *status quo* and limiting the possibility of conducting abortions.

However, it appears from Fico's reaction to Čaputová's victory in the presidential election that the fight against the 'ultraliberalism' attributed to her will also be an important element of Smer's strategy before the parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2020. This means that Smer intends primarily to mobilise its most loyal voters, and to reach out to the electorate of its coalition partner, the Slovak National Party (SNS), even at the cost of losing its more moderate electorate's support. The SNS is trying to outbid Smer in its social welfare promises; but at the same time, like Smer, it has strong links with business, including the millionaire Anton Siekel and the Slavia Capital Group. These figures are active in the tourism industry, on whose behalf the SNS has conducted vigorous lobbying. The head of the SNS, Andrej Danko, has done a lot to boost the party; when he took over it had no parliamentary seats (currently it has about 6-7% support). But his numerous blunders, flip-flops and controversies (such as the plagiarism in his doctoral thesis) are becoming a burden to the party. However, Danko has been working to regain the confidence of voters, and enjoys performing as the defender of Slovak interests against the predations of foreign corporations and a proponent of strong relations with Russia.

The rhetoric and manifestoes of Smer and the SNS are most successful with older voters, especially in the poorer and more conservative eastern part of the country and on the Slovak-Polish-Czech border (the Kysuce region). In those areas, they also benefit from extensive party structures at the local level: Smer alone has more than 15,000 members, by far the most of all the political groups. However, its narrowing electoral base means that although the party is still the leader in the polls, it has now lost the recent European elections, the last two presidential elections and is winning ever fewer deputies' seats (in the 2016 elections) and positions in regional (2017) and municipal (2018) councils. In recent years, the share among the party's supporters of people aged 60 and over has risen significantly (from more than 30% in 2012 to 51% in 2019). The percentage of voters who completed

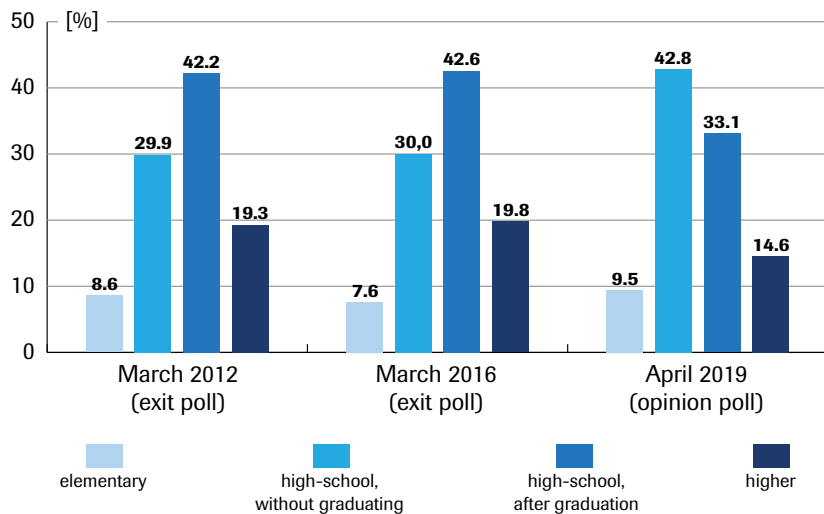
secondary education without graduating has also risen (from 30% in the previous two parliamentary elections to 43% now), while the share of those with higher education has dropped (from over 19% to less than 15% today). At the same time, the presidential and European elections have shown that the turnout in the strongly pro-Smer east of the country was much lower than in the opposition-oriented Bratislava, which indicates the limits Fico's party faces in mobilising its voter base.

Figure 1. Changes in the age structure of Smer's electorate



Source: *Denník N*, based on data from the Focus agency

Figure 2. Changes in the education levels of Smer's electorate



Source: *Denník N*, based on data from the Focus agency

III. THE CENTRE-RIGHT OPPOSITION AND THE NEW POLITICAL FORCES: THE STRUGGLE ‘FOR A DECENT SLOVAKIA’

The support Zuzana Čaputová received in the second round of the elections (58.4%) largely reflects the scale of support for the broader opposition, which wants to change the establishment and repair the state, but not the political system as a whole. The opposition is united in its very harsh criticism of Smer and its willingness to side with the demands voiced during the protests under the slogan of ‘For a decent Slovakia’ which began in spring 2018.

For years, however, the opposition has suffered from serious problems, including its lack of cohesion, personal disputes, and significant political differences concerning the parties’ economic, ideological, and European agendas¹². This internal friction, including at the personal level, has been effectively exploited by Smer, which portrays the opposition as incapable of cooperation and discredited by its many scandals. Richard Sulík ran the main opposition force in the parliament from his seat as an MEP from 2014 to 2019; his group Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS) is an economically and ideologically/culturally liberal party which opposes further European integration (and can count on around 7–9% of support in the polls). Smer still claims that a few years ago (when he was the head of the junior coalition party) he discussed nominations for the position of Attorney General with Kočner, who is currently accused of ordering Kuciak’s murder.

Igor Matovič, the head of the next biggest opposition group in the parliament, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO, with about 6% support) has been criticised for his

¹² The various right-wing opposition groups identify with various European political families: the Christian Democrat EPP (KDH, Spolu, Most-Híd, SMK-MKP, OLaNO, and probably Andrej Kiska’s party as well); the conservative ECR (SaS), the liberal ALDE (PS) and the new Eurosceptic EAPN group created by the Italian deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini (Sme Rodina).

scandalous statements and sudden U-turns, even by members of his own group. His credibility as a fighter for honesty and transparency in politics took a hit when he was fined for combining his parliamentary work with business activity.

For his part, the celebrity and businessman Boris Kollár, who leads the We Are Family grouping (Sme Rodina, 6–7% support), years ago had close contacts with the former leader of the Bratislava underworld, and has primarily promoted himself through articles in the tabloid press in which he talks about his numerous children (10 from 9 women). Kollár has declared that he entered into politics in order to “defend the Slovaks against the migrants and oligarchs” to whom the “standard politicians” are beholden.

In contrast to Smer and its coalition partner the SNS, the opposition groups have small membership bases (for example, in 2018 OLaNO had only 13 party members) and poorly developed regional structures (with the exception of the Christian Democratic Movement, KDH – see below).

The weakness of the parliamentary opposition means that Slovaks are willing to support new political entities. In every parliamentary election since 2010 at least one new group has won seats, and this situation is likely to be repeated in the elections in spring 2020. The parties most likely to succeed this time are Progressive Slovakia (PS), and the centrist Together (Spolu), both established at the turn of 2018; these two ran as a coalition in the May elections to the European Parliament¹³ and together gained about 15–16% support in the polls. The creators and leaders of PS are businessmen linked to the IT industry, whereas Spolu was founded by politicians from other centre-right formations. A characteristic of both parties is that key positions in them are occupied by people in their

¹³ These parties have not yet competed in parliamentary elections, but due to some deputies changing their party affiliation, Spolu currently has six seats in parliament, and PS one.

thirties and forties, mostly from Bratislava, often with expert or business experience. Until recently this group also included Zuzana Čaputová, although she resigned from membership of the party after her victory in the presidential elections. They have promised voters greater transparency in the functioning of government and public institutions, which is intended to help create a fair and effective state. Spolu presents itself as a centre-right party, whereas Progressive Slovakia is consciously avoiding easy classification. At the European level, PS has joined the liberal ALDE group, and in its manifesto it has linked its demand to expand the range of incentives for business with a strong emphasis on equal opportunities for all citizens, as well as environmental protection measures.

Another party which stands a chance of entering parliament in the next election is For People (Za ľudí) announced by Andrej Kiska in the twilight of his presidential term. His grouping has a centrist profile, and is currently polling at about 6–11%, attracting voters mainly from the PS-Spolu coalition and SaS. In contrast to the former, though, Kiska cannot present himself as a new face in politics. During his presidency, Kiska struggled with numerous accusations from Smer, concerning the murky acquisition of a plot of land in his native Poprad, as well as tax offences. Stripped of presidential immunity, Kiska will be an even easier target for serious political attacks.

Changes have also occurred recently among the groups seeking conservative voters. The challenge for them, on the one hand, is the fight against the new president's 'ultraliberalism' as declared by Fico, and on the other the growing popularity of the 'anti-system' representatives, who are increasingly drawing upon traditional values. After the elections in 2016, Slovakia's traditional Christian Democratic grouping, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), lost all its parliamentary seats¹⁴, but most surveys

¹⁴ In parliament the KDH is currently represented by one deputy who was elected from a different group's party list.

indicate that they will regain some of them in next year's elections. They achieved good results during the May elections to the European Parliament, where they received nearly 10% of the vote, despite competition from the newly founded Christian Union; this group was created by defectors from KDH and OĽaNO who accused their old parties of passivity in implementing their ideological demands. The new party, which got 3.8% of the vote (and thus did not win any seats), did however succeed in splitting the conservative electorate, primarily taking votes from OĽaNO (which got only 5.3%).

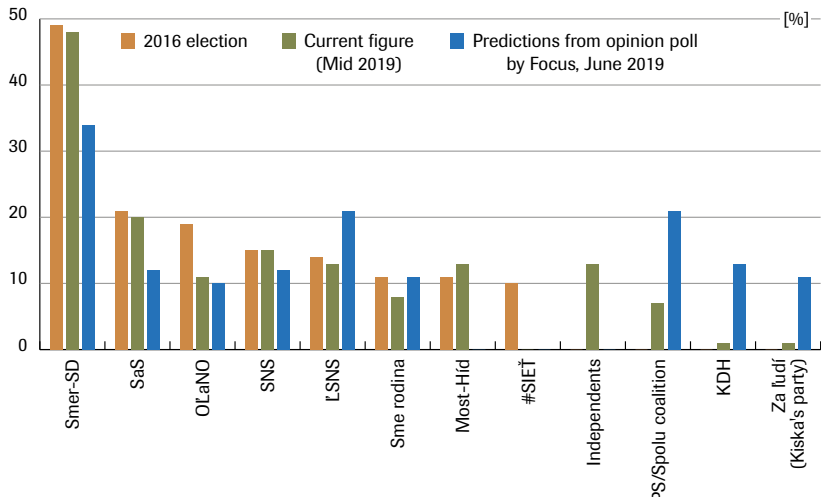
The shake-up among the parties drawing upon Christian values has been accompanied since the beginning of this century by a decline in the number of believers declaring attachment to the major Christian denominations¹⁵. This has coincided with new trends in relations between the church hierarchy and the politicians. Cooperation between bishops and the KDH under the chairmanship of Alojz Hlina has been weakening; meanwhile, the voices of priests who are sympathetic to the anti-system forces have been getting louder (for example via social networks). The Catholic hierarchy also faces the dilemma of how to respond to Čaputová, whose liberal views on some issues run contrary to the Church's teachings, but whose will to fight abuses of power against vulnerable people has the sympathy of many Slovak Catholics. While she was campaigning as deputy head of Progressive Slovakia she received support from the former ordinary of Trnava diocese Róbert Bezák, but his successor in this position, Ján Orosch, strongly discouraged support for 'ultra-liberal' candidates. According to polls, in the first round of the presidential elections Čaputová won the

¹⁵ According to the last census (of 2011), 62% of Slovaks declare Roman Catholic religion, 5.9% belong to the largest Lutheran Church, and 3.8% are Greek Catholics; atheists represent 13.4% of the population. These are worse results for the three major Christian churches than 10 years previously (68.9, 6.9 and 4.1%), but both Catholic denominations did better than in 1991 (60.4 and 3.4%); the percentage of Lutherans was 6.2%). The percentage of atheists is gradually increasing (from 9.8% in 1991, and 13% in 2001).

support of 36% of Catholics and 42% of Protestants (and won 57% and 58% respectively in the second round).

Decreasing support for Smer in recent years has opened up a chance for the right-wing opposition to remove it from power. However, the parties need at least to halt their mutual attacks and agree on a pre-election strategy, which the Slovak political leaders are increasingly beginning to realise. This process is taking place only slowly, however, and is occurring in parallel with the fragmentation of the party scene due to the creation of new political formations. This joining of forces was initiated by the coalition between PS and Spolu in February 2019, and these hitherto marginal projects are now, as a coalition, the strongest opponents to Smer. Talks on possible cooperation between this bloc and the party of former President Kiska are proceeding, while OĽaNO is discussing a coalition with the KDH and the SMK-KMP, representing the Hungarian minority, but which has remained outside the parliament since 2012. Difficult decisions also lie ahead for the leadership of the Hungarian/Slovak group Most-Híd which is on the verge of the electoral threshold. Most-Híd was part of the ruling coalition with Smer, but before the second round of presidential elections it declared its support for Čaputová.

Figure 3. Possible changes in Slovak parliament after 2020 elections



The bars show the number of seats in the 150-seat National Council.

Source: Authors' own calculations

IV. THE 'ANTI-SYSTEM': FRUSTRATED SLOVAKIA

One consequence of the growing disillusionment with political elites in Slovak society, next to the drop in voter turnout and the growing popularity of new people in politics, is the rise in support for anti-system forces. The main representatives of this trend in March's presidential elections were Štefan Harabin and Marian Kotleba, who together received almost a quarter of the vote.

The better result (14.3%) went to Harabin, a controversial Supreme Court judge. In the 1990s he worked closely with Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, whose strong-man rule delayed Slovakia's integration into the EU and NATO¹⁶. When Harabin was asked during the campaign who he thought had been the best Prime Minister of Slovakia so far, he named Mečiar; and as the nominee of Mečiar's party he held office as deputy prime minister and justice minister in Fico's first government (2006–9). Since the 1990s Harabin has held posts in the country's most important institutions, although for several years he has sharply criticised the whole political scene, accusing almost all sides of corruption and betraying the nation's interests. In the presidential elections he found a great deal of support among groups of older and poorer voters with no college education. His constituency is an unstable mix of supporters of the ruling Smer and SNS parties and (to a lesser extent) the opposition group Sme Rodina. For them Harabin, presenting himself as a competent lawyer who had been fighting the corrupt system for years, was a more convincing option than Kotleba, who

¹⁶ Vladimír Mečiar (b. 1942) was Slovak Prime Minister from 1993 to 1998 (with a nine-month break in 1994). In the early 1990s, together with the Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus, he was one of the main architects of the division of Czechoslovakia, and thus the creation of an independent Slovak state. During Mečiar's rule democratic standards were repeatedly violated; the special forces were used to fight his political opponents (as in the case of the abduction of President Michal Kováč's son), and the privatisation process led to the construction of oligarchic structures. People affiliated with the regime still occupy important state bodies, such as Harabin himself, and Jaroslav Reznik, the head of the public media.

as a young radical had been at the forefront of anti-Roma marches just a few years previously.

One way in which Harabin's campaign tried to attract voters was his rhetoric of sovereignty. He stressed that Slovakia does not need to be clearly anchored in either the West or the East, and should pursue a 'multi-vector' policy, that is, develop cooperation with both NATO and Russia. In this way he appealed to the emotions which Mečiar had drawn upon in the 1990s: defending Slovakia's right to choose its own path of transformation, and rejecting the blind imitation of Western models. In fact, Mečiar used such rhetoric to try and cover the failure of his foreign policy after the West, in connection with the violation of democratic standards in Slovakia, rejected Bratislava's aspirations to join NATO and the EU in 1995¹⁷. Just as then the slogans Mečiar employed were in line with Moscow's interests, so also now Harabin's views on international politics are largely in line with the Kremlin's narrative (including criticism of the 'fascist' government in Ukraine, and denials of the annexation of Crimea and of Russia's participation in shooting down the Malaysian aircraft over occupied Ukraine). Harabin's demands include the immediate lifting of EU sanctions against Russia and the demilitarisation of Central European countries (including the reduction of Slovakia's defence spending, in favour of the health service). Although he has referred to NATO as "a relic that will disappear over time", that has not prevented him from suggesting that Russia could join NATO someday. Harabin has not demanded that Slovakia should simply leave the EU, but claims that the Slovak position is "shameful", and that the government accepts the "diktat of Brussels". He has spread rumours that "thousands of migrants" are already in or will soon arrive in Slovakia. He has also tried to convince his electorate that Slovakia should get the EU to limit its actions to economic issues, and that at any moment Bratislava may revoke its consent to the transfer of some national competences to the EU.

¹⁷ A. Duleba, 'Slovenská zahraničná politika - bilancia šiestich rokov a perspektivy zmeny', *Mezinárodní vztahy*, 1999, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 36-54.

Marian Kotleba is the chairman of the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS), whose roots lie in extreme groups drawing upon Slovak nationalism and even neo-Nazi traditions. In the first round of the presidential elections he won 10.4% of the vote. Kotleba's electoral base is made up of LSNS voters, a stable and well-motivated group of supporters, which is popular especially among younger (under 30), less-educated voters.

A factor contributing to the political success of Kotleba and his party include the coexistence of the Slovak and Roma communities, a controversial subject in the country. Slovakia has the second highest percentage (9%) of Roma population in the EU (after Bulgaria), among which the employment rate is only 25% (compared to 68% in Slovak society in general)¹⁸. The Roma are particularly numerous in the areas of the Banská Bystrica region which were hardest hit by the economic transformation of the 1990s, and it was this region which became the cradle of LSNS. Until 2017 Kotleba headed the regional government there, and during the 2016 elections his party openly declared a fight against 'the parasites from the [Roma] settlements' and crimes committed by Roma.

LSNS also benefits from the consistently positive image among part of Slovak society of the Slovak State (or First Slovak Republic, 1939-45), which was subordinate to the Third Reich, and of its leader Father Jozef Tiso, who was jointly responsible for crimes including the deportation of Slovakia's Jewish population to the death camps. 19% and 9% of Slovaks respectively have, like Kotleba, a positive opinion of the Slovak State and Tiso¹⁹. The radicalism of some of LSNS's demands led to the General Prosecutor's Office filing an application in

¹⁸ *OCED Economic Surveys: Slovak Republic 2019*, OCED, Paris 2019; read.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-economic-surveys-slovak-republic-2019_eco-surveys-svk-2019-en#page2read.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-economic-surveys-slovak-republic-2019_eco-surveys-svk-2019-en#page2.

¹⁹ 'Osudové osmičky v historickém vědomí české a slovenské veřejnosti: události, období, osobnosti', CVVM, 12 June 2018; https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4645/f9/pd180612.pdf.

2017 to dissolve the party on the grounds of its extremism and ‘fascistic tendencies’, but towards the end of April 2019 the Supreme Court definitively rejected this application²⁰.

The success in court has not only legitimised the presence of Kotleba’s party on the political scene, but has also helped it to gradually move away from its extremist positions toward the centre. For a long time LSNS has been softening its rhetoric and anti-Roma slogans, focusing instead on the ‘defence of national interests and traditions’. This has helped the party to broaden its electorate; during the first round of presidential elections this helped Kotleba to second place among unemployed voters, but also with richer Slovaks (those whose net earnings exceed €1200 per month). Support for LSNS is also growing among the elderly and women, who had hitherto been distrustful of Kotleba. At the same time the party is managing to reach both practicing Catholics (24% of its votes) and atheists (31% of its votes)²¹.

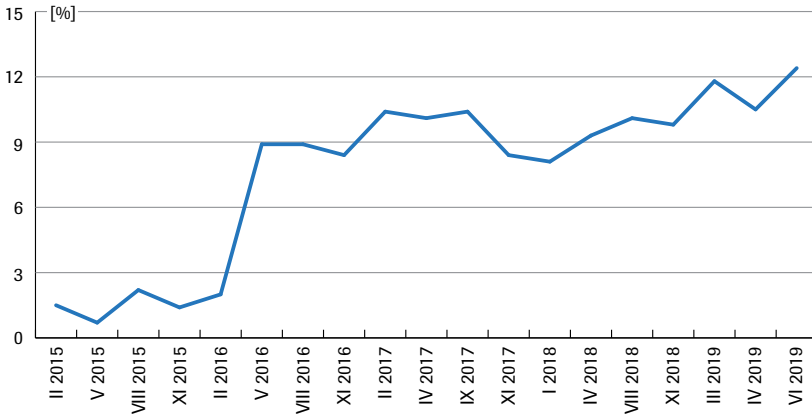
The level of support for Kotleba has remained firm, despite the media coverage and political ostracism and marginalisation of the party (LSNS is commonly called a ‘fascist’ party). Regardless, support for the party since the 2016 parliamentary elections (when it got 8%) has risen to 11.5–14%²², usually making it the third political force in the country (see Figure 4). Kotleba’s party came third in May’s European parliamentary elections, and its result of 12.1% is its best yet in national elections. The main threat to Kotleba’s party in the ‘anti-system’ field (and also to Smer, to some degree) may come from a group led by Hara-bin, although it is not yet certain whether such a party will be formed.

²⁰ In 2006, the Supreme Court dissolved the previous group led by Marian Kotleba (*Slovenská pospolitost’-Národná strana*, Slovak Community-National Party). Since then, extremist circles have begun to attach even greater importance to ensuring that the wording in the official documents did not constitute grounds for the proscription of their structures.

²¹ M. Hanus, ‘Kotleba je už uprostred nás a len tak ľahko neodíde’, *Postoj*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.postoj.sk/43367/kotleba-je-uz-uprostred-nas-a-len-tak-lahko-odide>.

²² The party got 13.9% in a poll in May by AKO, and 12.5% in the June poll by Focus.

Figure 4. Support for LSNS in 2015–19



Source: Authors' own compilation based on data from Focus agency

Both Harabin and Kotleba owe their popularity to their appearances in media which are building up their position as alternatives to the mainstream media. When discussing foreign affairs, these media often spread conspiracy theories and views which fit the Kremlin's narrative (see Box); they help these politicians to attract a large part of Slovak voters who feel they are victims of the economic transformation and are afraid of the changes associated with globalisation.

They believe that foreign capital is draining the country's economy: for example, Kotleba's party has challenged the legitimacy of the significant incentives granted to foreign investors (the Jaguar Land Rover plant in Nitra, which started work in autumn 2018, has received support estimated at half a billion euros). According to polling in 2018 a third of Slovaks assess the state's economic situation negatively, which is by far the worst result among the countries of the Visegrád Group²³.

²³ In the poll, 28% of Slovaks felt the country's economic situation was good or very good, and 34% saw it as bad or very bad. In all other countries in the region the positive number outweighed the negative: in Hungary 29% to 20%, in the Czech Republic 44% to 15%, and in Poland 57% to 7%. See 'Hodnocení

The media and politicians who have most harshly criticised the current course of the country's development are the most vocal exponents of these problems, which are thus becoming an ever greater part of the mainstream debate. Slovak economists have drawn attention to the risks associated with the national economy's very large and growing dependence on one branch of industry: Slovakia was the largest producer of cars *per capita* in the world even before the launch of the Jaguar factory, and VW alone is responsible for 10% of Slovak exports. At the same time, the domestic added value in exports (55%) is the lowest in the OECD (for example, Poland's is 73%); this means that exports, which are often costly, only improve the local population's situation to a small extent.

Media disinformation in Slovakia

In Slovakia media services which present themselves as independent alternatives to the mainstream media are relatively popular, and they present a perspective which is close to that of the Kremlin. The most widely followed of these is Hlavné správy, which describes itself as a 'conservative daily'; it has about 1 million readers per month, and is the third most visited news website. The liberal media have revealed a range of evidence demonstrating that its editorial board has ties to Kremlin-linked Russians. Another popular pro-Russian service is Parlamentné listy (with about 170,000 readers), which – like its Czech counterpart – is owned by the Czech Senator Ivo Valenta (a member of the Senate group of the right-wing ODS party). The Russian Sputnik agency has a section on Slovakia on its Czech webpage. The left-wing weekly Slovo and its associated website also publish pro-Kremlin content. The popular Internet radio station Slobodný vysielateľ is important for

ekonomické situace a materiálních životních podanek v středoevropském srovnání – leden 2018', CVVM, 28 March 2018; cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4566/f9/evl180328.pdf.

the alternative, pro-Kremlin media, as it has helped promote Štefan Harabin as one of the leading anti-system figures. Marian Kotleba is also a frequent guest on the station. The susceptibility of Slovaks to the misinformation and conspiracy theories propagated in the above-mentioned media is evidenced by the results of a poll concerning the anti-government protests in spring 2018; up to 35% of respondents believed that the demonstrations were being controlled from abroad.

Harabin and Kotleba's manifestoes have many features in common, although any alliance between them would be effectively impeded by each man's political ambitions and mutual distrust. Both make heavy use of ideological topics, presenting themselves as defenders of traditional values and outlining a vision wherein the five million Slovaks would be absorbed and dispersed in the liberal Western world. The two leaders of the anti-system part of society argue that Slovakia must defend its sovereignty against both Brussels and Washington. Kotleba attracts voters who prefer a more radical solution. His party collected signatures for a proposal to hold a referendum on Slovakia leaving the EU; after this initiative failed, he has now proposed organising a referendum on leaving NATO. For this part of the electorate, cooperation with Harabin would be risky, because the latter – as a politician who supported membership of the eurozone and the Lisbon Treaty in the past – would appear unreliable, and too much a part of the system which he has been criticising.

V. PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

The parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2020 will see a clash between three political camps: the ruling camp, made up of increasingly conservative social democrats and nationalists; the centre-right and liberal opposition, which is bound together almost exclusively by its harsh criticism of Fico's party; and the anti-system forces, who are growing in strength despite the country's strong economic performance. The final form of these camps is still not a foregone conclusion, and reshuffles within their ranks will continue. There are signs that Smer will try to introduce a narrative into the election campaign of fighting in defence of its social policies and the traditional values which (according to Smer) are threatened by the centre-right and liberal opposition. They, in turn, will stress the need for healing the state and holding accountable of those guilty of abuses of power under Smer.

The opinion polls, less than a year before the parliamentary elections, give the centre-right and liberal parties a good chance of forming the future government. However, this will probably require a broad alliance of at least four groups with very diverse political platforms, which means any such coalition would be exposed to regular turbulence. Crucial in the post-election arithmetic will be the number of seats gained by Kotleba's party, which at present has zero coalition potential. If it (and possibly also Hrabín's group) achieves great success, some elements of the opposition would consider possible cooperation with Smer. However, a pre-condition for the establishment of such a pro-European and pro-Atlantic coalition would probably be the removal of Fico and Kaliňák from their leadership positions in Smer. In order to protect himself against such a scenario and stay in power, Fico could make far-reaching concessions in talks with those groups who have not definitively ruled out entering into a coalition with Smer (such as Sme Rodina); however, he could also examine the option of establishing a minority government with the support of Kotleba's party. This possibility was indicated by the cooperation

between Smer and LSNS in some votes in parliament. However the price for such an alliance would be high: Slovakia would receive serious criticism from its European partners, Smer would have problems with other European social democratic parties, and would face resistance from the majority of Slovak society, which showed in 2018 that it is fully able to mobilise and hold mass protests.

KRZYSZTOF DĘBIEC, JAKUB GROSZKOWSKI