

SLOVAKIA POLITICAL AND ELECTION REPORT VOLUME THREE

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This is the third in a series of reports on political events in Slovakia as the country approaches critical parliamentary and local elections in the fall of this year. In June, the first issue provided basic background information. The July issue discussed the human rights environment and the campaign. This and future issues will focus on the campaign in the weeks leading up to the parliamentary election on September 25 and 26, 1998.

As the period before the official campaign comes to a close, there have been numerous important developments that will affect what happens during the next 30 days before Slovaks go to the polls.

The Latest Polls

When the opposition Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) first announced its formation in 1997, it quickly drew support from many voters who saw it as an acceptable alternative to the ruling coalition headed by Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. By July of 1997, a FOCUS survey revealed 34% support compared to 27% for Prime Minister Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS). SDK remained ahead of HzDS consistently until early this year when Rudolf Schuster, the popular mayor of the eastern city of Kosice, announced the formation of the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), whose ranks are populated with popular celebrities and prominent businessmen. Later in the Spring, SDK faced confirmed allegations of media bribes for favorable coverage. These events put HzDS back on top. SDK has staged a slight comeback in July and August, with some polls showing SDK and HzDS swapping places for the top position and remaining within a few points of each other. Following are the most recent numbers tallied by Slovak polling agencies:

An MVK poll conducted between August 7th and August 13th gave the lead to HzDS with 25.7% compared with SDK's 22.6%. Other parties would receive the following support: SOP - 14.9%; The Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) - 12%; the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) - 7.4% and the Slovak National Party (SNS) - 7.1%. A FOCUS poll conducted between August 3rd and August 12th had similar results: HzDS - 25%; SDK - 23.7%; SOP - 14.5%; SDL - 12.5%; SMK - 9.2% and SNS - 7.2%.

If the elections were held now, no party would receive enough votes to form a majority government. These most recent polls show that HzDS and SNS -- the two parties now in the ruling coalition that are given a chance of winning seats in the new parliament -- would not gain more than 33% if the elections took place in August. Combined opposition parties could get as much as 60%. Nevertheless, the party that comes out on top has the first chance of forming a new government. Many, if not most analysts believe that the HzDS will be the top vote-getter.

This outcome could produce prolonged deal making after the election to form a government. Following the last parliamentary election in

September 1994, in which HzDS was the top vote-getter with 35%, Mr. Meciar took several months to conduct lengthy coalition talks to construct a strong governing coalition. In the end, talks with the SDL and others failed, and HzDS settled for a coalition with the SNS and the Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS). It is unlikely that any of the parties in the current opposition camp (SDK, SOP, SDL, or SMK) would ultimately enter into coalition with HzDS.

The Press

Previous issues of this report have discussed the media situation in Slovakia. We have reported that there are popular independent media outlets that offer a wide variety of views to Slovaks. The main source of information for most Slovaks is television. While many believe that the state-run Slovak Television (STV) is biased in favor of the government, a more popular independent station, Television Markiza, offers alternative information and views.

With support from NDI, two Slovak NGOs (the Helsinki Citizens Assembly and the Association for Support of Local Democracy) launched a media monitoring project called MEMO'98 in mid-June. In the ensuing weeks, MEMO'98 has released four reports revealing disturbing differences in the way that news outlets portray political events. Among the findings: STV, the state-run television station, consistently offers more time to the incumbent government and HzDS than to opposition parties. Furthermore, the coverage of the government and ruling coalition is consistently positive, while stories about the opposition are consistently negative. Non-state media have shown a lesser degree of bias toward the political opposition. For more information, please visit the MEMO'98 web site

New concerns about undue political influence in the media have arisen. On August 18th, Pavol Rusko, the General Director and part-owner of TV Markiza, the largest independent television station in Slovakia and by many accounts the most popular broadcast channel, was deprived of his direct control over the station when a district court ruled that some unpaid debts led to the transfer of stock to a new company, which had bought the interests of a Rusko creditor.

After several days of alarm over political malpractice, it looks as if Rusko will continue in his job as General Director for the moment -- but with his authority over operations somewhat curtailed until additional legal matters are resolved. Political ramifications should become clearer in the near future. MEMO'98, with six weeks of monitoring data collected, will be watching carefully for changes in news coverage.

The Army

While Defense Minister Jan Sitek (SNS) was on vacation last week, the Chairman of the Parliament, Ivan Gasparovic (HzDS), attempted to execute presidential authorities vested to him as the Office of the Presidency has been vacant since March owing to political stalemate. Gasparovic ignored Sitek's recommendation for a new Armed Forces Chief of Staff, and appointed instead a little-known colonel, Marian Miklus, to the post. The current Chief of Staff, Jozef Tuchyna, had announced plans to resign in order to run for parliament under the SDL banner. Several new generals were also appointed at the same time by Gasparovic.

Opposition leaders have challenged the appointments as illegal as relevant laws mandate that the Chief of Staff will be appointed by the President based on a recommendation of the Minister of Defense. Tuchyna himself has challenged the legality of this move, announcing

publicly that he is still Chief of Staff and declaring that only his commands are valid. "Those planning to mar my commands or not comply with laws will be prosecuted, in accordance with Criminal Code," he stated. Even HzDS's coalition ally, the Slovak National Party (SNS), has reacted angrily to the government's attempts to replace the Chief of Staff while the Defense Minister was on vacation, leading to public strife in the ruling coalition in the weeks before the election. At the moment, the situation remains unclear; there are, in effect, two Chiefs of Staff.

The Central Election Commission

The Central Election Commission (CEC) has been operating since the end of July. The government used its authority to appoint a Ministry of Interior official, Jozef Liska, to be the Recorder of the Commission. The Chairman and Vice Chairman, chosen by lot, are Slovak National Party (SNS) member Iveta Lapunikova and Communist Party (KSS) member Stefan Murin, respectively. Four working sections were established and are headed by two HzDS members, one SNS member and Jan Carnogursky representing the SDK.

The CEC has also decided, again by lot, the numbers to be assigned to each party on election ballots. HzDS gained the number one spot. SDK will be number 8.

In the ensuing weeks, the composition and inclinations of the CEC are becoming clearer. A total of 18 parties that submitted candidate lists for registration had the opportunity to appoint two members each to sit on the Commission. After examination of the lists, however, several parties were confronted with challenges, including a HzDS challenge to the SDK. The Supreme Court promptly ruled that the SDK registration was correct and supported the de-registration of only one party, the new Real Social Democratic Party of Slovakia, leaving 17 parties eligible to participate in the elections. Six are expected to pass the five percent threshold to enter parliament: HzDS, SDK, SOP, SDL, SMK, and SNS. Of the remaining new parties on the CEC, HzDS has been able to enlist their support on important questions.

In the meantime, the District Election Commissions have also been established, and Precinct Election Commissions will be formed by August 26th, which is also the date of the beginning of the official, 30-day campaign period.

Privitization Referendum

Throughout the summer, HzDS has collected petition signatures calling for a referendum to be conducted simultaneously with parliamentary elections. The referendum, which has been approved, will contain a question asking citizens to express their opposition to any future attempts to privatize certain state-owned energy companies. Opposition leaders decry the referendum as a political stunt to divert attention from allegations that the ruling coalition has mismanaged privatization of many important state-owned businesses during the last several years - enriching allies while robbing Slovak citizens of their due.

The referendum may sow confusion in the election process. A referendum commission separate from that overseeing the parliamentary election will be established. Different precincts could be created, and possibly different polling stations. There will also be a different official campaign period (with different allocations of television time to parties in parliament and different prohibitions about publication of polling data). Many are concerned that these factors could make it much more difficult to monitor election day activities.

Anti-Western Campaign

Throughout his tenure in government, Meciar has attacked foreign commentary on political developments in Slovakia as deliberate attempts to undermine Slovakia's sovereignty. In recent weeks there have been signals of a heightened anti-western campaign. After U.S. Ambassador Ralph Johnson raised concerns about changes to the parliamentary election law, Prime Minister Meciar accused him of overstepping diplomatic limits and of "co-organizing" anti-government meetings.

While Slovakia has obligations, under international treaties, to allow foreign and domestic observers to monitor elections, and despite numerous public statements that international observers would be invited, the Meciar government has made statements that make clear its discomfort with this arrangement. In June, after the Council of Europe announced plans to send a monitoring commission to Slovakia, Meciar said: "I know the program of this visit and that it meddles with every possible political affair, except for election issues. I will therefore not meet with them." In July, when discussing the likelihood that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) would also send observers, Meciar raised fears that such observers might attempt to interfere in internal government matters, including the police and security guards. Earlier this month, the government released a list of specific countries to be invited to send monitors, instead of relying on the OSCE to gather its multinational delegation. Only last week (August 18th) did the Foreign Affairs Ministry finally deliver an official invitation letter to the OSCE.

Alarm about foreign influence is also being used to paint Slovak groups independent of the government as acting against the interests of Slovakia. Slovak NGOs engaged in electoral education and monitoring activities are routinely accused of being influenced by foreign money. HzDS MP, Irena Belohorska stated, on the popular Slovak TV political talk show "Kroky," that the influence of "foreign capital" on the upcoming elections was "unacceptable." Other signals indicate that there will be fierce opposition from ruling coalition members of the Central Election Commission to requests by Slovak organizations to organize domestic monitoring efforts.

The pro-government newspaper Slovenska Republika has launched a series of articles singling out international organizations for direct criticism – blaming them for besmirching the reputation of Slovakia. NDI, along with the International Republican Institute (IRI), the International Helsinki Federation, the US Embassy, USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy and numerous Slovak groups which benefit from western backing were blasted in a two-part series entitled "How To Murder Slovakia." This and other articles in the pro-government newspaper listed names and addresses of those it believes are interfering in internal Slovak affairs.

Conclusions

The campaign leading up to the parliamentary elections on September 25 and 26, 1998 officially begins this week (August 26th). Yet the campaign has really been well-underway for a much longer time. New rules about "official" campaigning are now in effect and the Central Election Commission, the Council on Radio and Television Broadcasting and the Ministry of Interior are required to supervise campaign related activities in the final 30 days. The way that these rules are administered will be watched carefully by Slovaks and international observers.

The parliamentary and local elections cannot be evaluated in isolation of the political context in which they occur. This and previous reports have highlighted political developments in the past several months. However, Slovakia's political climate in the past four years has been troubling: repeated violations of the rule of law, as exemplified by the deliberate subterfuge of the May 1997 referendum on NATO membership and the direct election of the presidency; legal, financial, and at times physical attacks against opposition politicians and independent journalists; a general lack of transparency in government affairs; and the prevalence of political hostility, polarization, distrust, enmity and fear. The pattern of undemocratic political activity since 1994 and the lack of measures to build public confidence in political and electoral processes place into doubt the integrity of the upcoming elections as democratic political exercises.

Current episodes of apparent political intimidation of journalists, political encroachment into the armed forces, and the government's unilateral changes to the election law four months before the election, and intolerance shown toward domestic groups working to promote a fair and transparent election process contribute to the unease felt about the upcoming elections.

No one can predict how all these events will effect the elections next month, but they have resulted in a climate defined by division and uncertainty. Regardless of the outcome of these elections, this damage to the civic culture will take some time to repair, and healthy debate about other public policy questions has been stalled; meaning that any new government will face serious challenges in the months and years ahead.

Citizen Involvement

Despite the troubled election process, many Slovaks are getting directly involved in election-related activities. Slovak NGOs have organized numerous candidate forums and published and distributed voter education materials. Others citizen groups have produced television and film advertisements and organized rock concerts appealing to young, first-time voters to exercise their franchise. A "Journey for Slovakia" has mobilized hundreds of volunteers to walk through cities and villages across the country distributing voter education materials.

Thousands of Slovaks are also being mobilized to monitor the actual voting and counting processes at polling stations across the country under the aegis of a project called Obcianske Oko (Civic Eye).

Meanwhile, opposition parties have overcome many obstacles to launch serious and organized efforts to offer Slovaks a meaningful choice at the ballot box.

These reports highlight many problems that have occurred in the pre-election period, but countless Slovaks are determined to assert their rights and exercise their civic duties to work toward a fair election process.

NDI Pre-Election Assessment

NDI has conducted a pre-election monitoring program in Slovakia since March. As the elections approach, we have formed an International Advisory Committee (IAC) composed of prominent political figures from around the world who will follow and comment on events in Slovakia: former U.S. President Jimmy Carter; former

Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar; former Canadian Prime Minister Joseph Clark; former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton; House of Lords member Lady Shirley Williams; former U.S. Senator Paul Simon; U.S. Congressman Steny Hoyer; U.S. Congressman John Porter; former U.S. Ambassador to Austria Swanee Hunt. The IAC is joined by NDI President Kenneth Wollack.

NDI will conduct a pre-election mission, comprised of an international group of political leaders, in late August/early September to evaluate the political climate and election developments as they related to international standards for democratic elections. The delegation will meet with senior representatives of government bodies, political parties and other nongovernmental organizations, and the media, as well as with relevant international institutions. The delegation will issue a public statement on the basis of its findings.

Coming Up

This report will be published more frequently as the elections near. NDI will be following events closely and offer up-to-date information on the activities of the Central, District and Precinct Election Commissions, various international observer delegations, the media, the political parties and local NGOs. At the moment, controversies concerning the armed forces and the media--particularly Markiza Television--merit close attention, as do the activities of the Central Election Commission.

About NDI

Based in Washington, D.C., the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nongovernmental, nonpartisan organization working to strengthen democratic institutions and processes worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to political and civic leaders who are working to advance democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI seeks to help democratic leaders and activists to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in governmental and political processes.

NDI In Slovakia

NDI's election processes program in Slovakia was established earlier this year to help Slovak civic groups working for fair parliamentary and local elections to:

- Monitor political and election-specific developments in the period prior to the elections, and advocate measures needed for an open and transparent election process compatible with international practices for fair and free elections;
- Provide voters with accurate, impartial information about candidates and their parties, so that they can make informed choices and appreciate the importance of participating in the election process.

Specific activities include:

Election law commentary

An expert NDI election law advisory group provided written commentary on proposed amendments to the parliamentary election law, and visited Bratislava prior to the law's passage to discuss its recommendations concerning the amendments with political parties, civic groups, and the public at-large through the Slovak media.

Media monitoring

A group of Slovak monitors (MEMO '98) established by NDI is monitoring Slovak state and independent media to assess fairness in media access and reporting on political events in the run-up to the elections.

Pre-election mission

A NDI delegation of election experts will visit Slovakia in early September to assess the political climate and election process in the run-up to the late-September vote, and make recommendations as needed concerning fair electoral standards.

Election-day monitoring

NDI is working with a Slovak civic group, the Association of Fair Elections (AFE), and other NGOs to recruit, train and deploy several thousand Slovak citizens in polling stations on election day as nonpartisan observers. The observers plan to monitor voting procedures and ballot counting processes throughout the country.

In addition to NDI's election-related work, the Institute has, since 1994, conducted citizen political participation programs in seven cities throughout Slovakia. NDI's office in Banska Bystrica coordinates these efforts.

NDI's programs in Slovakia are funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

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