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**Research Report**

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# A Festival of Populism

Slovakia after Its 2004 Presidential Election

*Kai-Olaf Lang*

Ivan Gasparovic, the controversial former president of parliament, has won the presidential election in Slovakia. In the final runoff ballot on 17 April 2004, he defeated his former political associate and former prime minister, Vladimir Meciar. Both of these politicians had been largely responsible for Slovakia's international detachment during the 1990s. As Gasparovic is being supported by the most dynamic opposition power of the populist party Smer ("Direction"), the result of the election is a warning signal for Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda's moderate-right coalition. A new axis in Slovak politics is looming on the horizon. In addition, this election is a forewarning to the newly extended European Union (EU). The outcome of the election has shown that some populist groups and politicians have joined the EU thinking that they are capable of winning elections. The EU must decide how to deal with these members if radical, populist, and Euroskeptical parties come into power.

In previous years Slovakia gained a positive image because of its determined zeal in reforming economic policies. But this image is subject to interference by the new head of state, who in the past has tended to be a confrontational, populist politician. Further eroding this image are continuing unsolved social problems and numerous scandals within the governing coalition.

## The Results

The real surprise of the presidential election in Slovakia were the results of the first ballot on April 4<sup>th</sup>:

1. Vladimir Meciar received the most votes with nearly one-third of all votes.
2. Ivan Gasparovic quite unexpectedly finished in second place and therefore qualified for the final ballot.
3. Eduard Kukan, who had been supported by his own and Prime Minister Dzurinda's party, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU), as well as the liberal governing party, the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO), unexpectedly missed qualifying for the second ballot.
4. Office holder Rudolf Schuster fell below expectations and was only capable of convincing 7 percent of the voters.
5. The turnout for this ballot was only 48 percent—perceptibly lower than in the 1999 presidential election and in the 2002 parliamentary election.

**Table 1**  
**First ballot results, 4/4/2004**

<i>Nominees</i>	<i>Votes %</i>
Vladimir Meciar	32.7
Ivan Gasparovic	22.3
Eduard Kukan	22.1
Rudolf Schuster	7.4
Frantisek Miklosko	6.5
Martin Butora	6.5
Others	2.4

As none of the nominees could rally an absolute majority, a final ballot was necessary. The two choices for this runoff ballot left the Slovaks surprised, perplexed, and even dismayed. Earlier polls had shown that Eduard Kukan was seen as the lesser of the evils. He therefore had been expected to progress to the second ballot where he would have easily defeated his main competitor, Vladimir Meciar.

With the resulting duel between Gasparovic and Meciar as a result of the first ballot, the runoff was like *Skylla vs. Charybdis* for most voters. Because the governing parties had asked their supporters not to vote and had not offered recommendations or advice, these tensions were heightened.

The final ballot on April 17<sup>th</sup> resulted in a clear victory for Ivan Gasparovic. Four factors may have contributed to Gasparovic's success:

- ▶ Meciar (and his party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, HZDS) has a considerable number of reliable supporters on his side, but they are too few in number with regard to the total electorate. Meciar could only mobilize 35 to 40 percent of all voters.
- ▶ Gasparovic has a social bent. This trait appealed successfully to the bulk of those Slovaks demanding a reversal of to the current government's severe reform policies. "I am in favor of reforms, but I am not in favor of poverty," Gasparovic stated his socio-political credo immediately before the second ballot.
- ▶ Obviously, Gasparovic was a lesser evil than Meciar, who had discredited him-

**Table 2**  
**Second ballot results 17/04/2004**

<i>Nominees</i>	<i>Votes %</i>
Ivan Gasparovic	59.9
Vladimir Meciar	40.1

self completely in the eyes of many voters. In contrast to Meciar, Gasparovic has distanced himself from at least a few of the severe errors he had committed while president of parliament in the '90s. He has emphasized that he never belonged to HZDS's inner circle of power. That's why he stated he had only been partly responsible for their activities between 1994 and 1998.

- ▶ Gasparovic eventually profited from the support of Smer, currently the most popular opposition group. Smer is aiming at a "fruitful dialogue with representatives of the so-called 'Third Way' or the 'New Middle'" and is establishing contacts with social democratic parties in Europe. Even so, Smer's president, Robert Fico, neither showed reservations nor reluctance in supporting Gasparovic, in spite of his past. Fico wants to see Gasparovic as an "experienced statesman and a patriot."

These factors contributed to a turnout of 43.5 percent for the second ballot, which reveals that many supporters who voted on April 17<sup>th</sup> wanted to prevent a victory for Meciar.

A colorful heterogeneous electorate has gathered behind Gasparovic:

- ▶ Leftist protest voters of every shade, who were mostly attracted by Rudolf Schuster during the last presidential elections
- ▶ Former supporters of the social democratic leftist party
- ▶ Voters of the Communist Party
- ▶ And most notably, sympathizers of Robert Fico's Smer

In addition, sympathizers of the national-populist alliance launched Gasparovic's nomination. These are disappointed HZDS supporters and tough nationalists, i.e., loyal followers of the chauvinist national party,

the Slovak National Party (SNS). In the end, many voters chose Gasparovic over Meciar on the second ballot despite their “tummyache.”

## Winners

Apart from Ivan Gasparovic, who made his way in a short time from being an apostate of the unsuccessful Meciar to the holder of the supreme state office, Robert Fico (Smer) is the big winner of the presidential election of 2004. With Gasparovic, Fico has his man in the president's chair. Though Gasparovic does not depend on Fico, it will be important for Gasparovic to support his mentor in his fight against the governing coalition. For Fico who is the leader of the strongest opposition party, it must be a pleasant thought that a politician whose views are close to his will nominate the head of government after the next parliamentary election.

Fico may also benefit—as a consequence of having supported Gasparovic—from the failure of Eduard Kukan—who had been the main representative of the present governing coalition—as well as from the defeat of Prime Minister Dzurinda. In addition, it could prove useful for Fico if Gasparovic's alliance strengthens. In that case, one or more pro-Gasparovic groups (the alliance itself or his own party, the Movement for Democracy (HZD), or a fusion of the HZD with other nationalists opposing Meciar) could be represented in the next parliament where Fico would have potential allies for a future governing coalition.

Fico's most important success, however, was the defeat of Meciar and the HZDS. With his party, Smer, Fico proved to be the dominant opposition. This was possible because Fico established a strong alternative to the governing coalition and Meciar by supporting Gasparovic. Moreover, Gasparovic's triumph over HZDS once again triggered debates about Meciar's viability and the party's strategic orientation. So Fico made an attempt at driving a wedge into HZDS. Considering all of the

successes for Smer, it will soon be forgotten that Fico did not succeed in a referendum to force early re-elections due to the small voter turnout on April 4<sup>th</sup>. Smer is now likely to be again the winner in the elections for the European Parliament in June.

## Losers

The big losers of this presidential election are the foreign minister, Kukan, and head of government, Dzurinda, who are both members of the same party. Before the first ballot, Kukan had good prospects of winning the presidency. The real surprise of that first ballot was that Kukan did not even qualify for the second ballot. He was short by 3,600 votes. Kukan fully felt the voters' frustration with the politics of the government and Prime Minister Dzurinda. Kukan's chances were diminished considerably by the government's strict reform policies, by a high unemployment rate despite foreign investments, and by numerous scandals involving Kukan's governing party, SDKU. Under these circumstances the inability of right-moderate groups to agree on a mutual nominee for the election proved to be devastating.

The liberal-conservative votes were split among three nominees: Kukan, the Christian democrat Frantisek Miklosko, and the former Slovak ambassador to Washington, Martin Butora—who was running as an Independent. Even though this segment of the political spectrum received 35 percent of the votes, none of the conservative or liberal-conservative nominees were able to win a place on the second ballot. True to the voting trend of the past fifteen years, the traditional fragmentation of the conservative camp enabled national-populist forces to win the election. The last parliamentary elections were simply another exception confirming this rule.

It is doubtful whether the low turnout really was detrimental to Kukan and helped Meciar and Gasparovic. Compared to the overall results, Kukan came out much better in districts with a high voting absten-

tionism, while both Meciar and Gasparovic fared poorly there. A higher turnout might therefore have helped both Meciar and Gasparovic to achieve higher returns.

Finally, the incumbent Rudolf Schuster, was among the losers. He had been expected to do well with socially-minded protest voters because he criticized the government's reform policies. However, these voters abandoned him. Perhaps Schuster had jeopardized his campaign from the very beginning by his hesitation to participate in the elections. Furthermore, his inability to garner support from influential political powers had an unfavorable impact on his campaign. Schuster's natural ally would have been Fico's Smer, since Schuster, just like Fico, had reproached the government for excessive social hardships. However, in the end, Fico sided with Gasparovic, thus leading to Schuster's downfall. Several opinion polls showed a slump in Schuster's popularity exactly when Gasparovic's popularity began to increase. Only in Schuster's hometown of Kosice, in eastern Slovakia, along with a few southern Slovak districts with large Hungarian minorities, was Schuster able to make a strong showing.

### **...and HZDS?**

The elections revealed that HZDS still faces its old problem: with Vladimir Meciar as their candidate, the party is able to win niche support but no overall majority of votes. With Meciar as being chairman, HZDS is isolated and has no chance to form a government. As president Meciar would have had the chance to approach the governing coalition by making himself and HZDS acceptable through a constructive "cohabitation" with Prime Minister Dzurinda. However, his willingness to cooperate with the coalition, even selectively, was questioned openly among party members after the failure on the second ballot. Meciar declined to cooperate with his archrival, Fico, and he did not even congratulate Gasparovic on his victory. At

the same time, several leading HZDS members were signaling their interest in developing good relations with the new president, and they did not exclude contacts with Smer. These moves by HZDS appear to have been initiated by Fico after he declared that, from his point of view, all obstacles to cooperation with HZDS had been removed.

Although HZDS now faces many debates about its future as a result of the election, it is unlikely that a revolt will be mounted against Meciar. Rather, as has been a common occurrence, dissension could cause some party members, including members of parliament, to leave the party and join the Fico-Gasparovic groups.

### **Prospects**

The EU and many in Slovakia are ill at ease with the success of Gasparovic—a politician who had recently disregarded fundamental standards of democracy and the rule of law. Without a doubt, his election to the presidency will have consequences. But these consequences may be tempered by several factors.

#### **1. Limited Authority**

Slovakia's head of state does not have too much political power. During Rudolf Schuster's tenure in office—and also that of his predecessor, Michal Kovacs, who protected the president's office against Meciar's attempts at insubordination—one thing came clear: the head of state may be able to throw a wrench into the workings of the government, but he cannot stop it from functioning. On the other hand, the president may have a significant influence over officials in many important public offices. For instance, he appoints members of the Constitutional Court as well as the attorney general. Furthermore, he is the supreme commander of the armed forces. For the fragile minority government of Mikulas Dzurinda, the head of state's right of veto against new laws could have

negative repercussions. Such a veto can only be neutralized by an absolute majority in Parliament. But for the time being, relatively little will change, as the government has already had to come to terms with president Rudolf Schuster who—apart from foreign policy goals—was not necessarily well-disposed towards the ruling coalition.

## **2. Continued Weak Governing Coalition**

The coalition parties will try to unify against the apparent Fico-Gasparovic axis. As a consequence, pressure on Prime Minister Dzurinda could rise and force him to minor policy changes and some re-organization of government offices. However, Dzurinda's hold on office is solid since his party has expressed confidence in him. Moreover, none of the governing coalition groups is interested in new elections right now because they might be defeated or find themselves in the opposition. It may be expected, then, that the coalition will increase their efforts to gain popular support. Prime Minister Dzurinda's standings in the polls are weak while those of the populists are strong. Therefore, it is likely that Dzurinda will attempt to add a touch of patriotism to his and the party's image.

## **3. Gasparovic: an Awkward President for Dzurinda**

Meciar as president would probably have been a much more convenient partner for Dzurinda than Gasparovic. Meciar would have tried to get himself and his party back to normal and to get them out of their political quarantine, both at home and abroad. Accordingly, he would have tried to be flexible and cooperative with the Dzurinda administration. In contrast, Gasparovic could endeavor to harm the governing coalition as much as possible. However, in the beginning, he will direct his efforts toward creating a positive image for himself as a serious head of state. So, for the short term, he will not create any unneces-

sary conflicts in Bratislava. But after some time, Gasparovic could form a strategic alliance with the opposition. Over the longer term, there is a danger that Dzurinda will eventually start to have problems with the presidential palace.

## **4. Impact on Foreign Policy**

Slovakia's head of state is not in a position, nor does he have the will, to reverse current foreign policy. After 1998, Slovakia's foreign policy has been designed and structured by reform-oriented governments which have advocated membership in EU and NATO and have intended to be on friendly terms with the US. In Parliament, there is a stable majority for both memberships. The same goes for Ivan Gasparovic. When he declared that he favored Slovak troops remaining in Iraq, this was meant to demonstrate continuity towards the outside world, and also to dispel US concerns about his integrity. Also, his statement, according to which he did not consider it necessary to seek a referendum on the constitution of the EU, shows that Gasparovic aims at becoming a reliable partner in foreign policy.

Nevertheless, there are radical nationalists in the Confederation of the National Forces of Slovakia (KNSS) who promoted Gasparovic's run for president but who opposed NATO membership. On the European level, KNSS orients itself with the Union for a Europe of Nations, which is Euroskeptical. With respect to these interrelations, it should be noted that the head of state ratifies international treaties and therefore will exert influence during the enactment and implementation of a European constitutional treaty. But all in all, concerning EU and NATO, Gasparovic will probably cooperate with the government. To do otherwise would risk too much damage to his image during the sensitive first phase of his period in office.

President Gasparovic will certainly try to intensify the country's relationships with the East, for instance with Ukraine or Russia. One of the reasons for this might be

the fact that the governments in these countries do not care about his political biography. Relations with the Czech Republic will not play a dominant role, but Prague will cooperate with him without any complications. This is evidenced by Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, and his predecessor, Vaclav Havel, having congratulated him immediately after his victory. In fact, before the elections, Gasparovic had said that his first visit abroad would bring him to the Czech Republic.

The same cannot be said for Hungary, where shadows could be cast on Slovak-Hungarian relations if Gasparovic directs verbal assaults at the Hungarian minority or to Budapest. The parties that have supported Gasparovic (not only the nationalists but also Smer) get people's attention when they promise to investigate and uncover the true nationalist face of the Hungarian coalition party, or when they insist that there is a real danger in some "extremist Hungarian policies."

### **A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing or Rueful Sinner?**

How should Slovakia's European partners deal with the new president? Recall that also Ivan Gasparovic was responsible for things going off course in Slovakia during the '90s. Although he was self-critical and admitted his errors, it is not yet clear if that was just a political tactic to absolve himself of responsibility for these errors. In this respect, Gasparovic will have to produce evidence of his determination to make an honest new beginning.

Apart from the posture he takes towards the era of "Meciarism," Gasparovic has to be judged in terms of his programmatic orientation and the allies he will cooperate with. As for his ideology Gasparovic has a blurred profile. Even though he claims to be affiliated with the moderate left, he does not see any problems in cooperating with the far right. That's why special attention will have to be paid to Gasparovic's relations with extreme nationalists. So far, he

has tried to downplay the radicalism of the nationalists, at the same time highlighting some of their achievements and successes. For example, he praised the mayor of Zilina, who is also president of a nationalist party, for his commitment in convincing South Korean car manufacturer Hyundai to do a major investment in Slovakia. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether he will dissociate from his *faux pas* and abusive attacks against the Hungarian minority and the Slovak Romanies.

In the short-run, Slovakia's European partners should maintain restrained and avoid publicity at bilateral meetings with the new head of state. Zealous ignorance of past sins would help other populist groups in Central Eastern Europe to gain acceptance as "normal" political actors. Thus the populists' prospects in other countries would improve. On the other hand, Gasparovic should not be outcast permanently. If he strives for an honest process of coming to terms with the past, if he sticks to the rules of European democracy and the rule of law, and if he distances himself from ultra nationalists, he should gradually be integrated. The true test of Gasparovic's rebirth, and the test case in the eyes of the EU, will be his performance after the next parliamentary elections, where the new political mix could force him to side with the populist parties.

To the newly extended EU, the Slovak presidential election is a warning signal. The combination of disappointed voters, fragmented party systems, and dynamic populist movements may be smoothing the way to power for radical politicians in new member countries like Slovakia. The EU's member countries should come to an immediate agreement on how to react to such situations. Of course, such responses will need to review each case individually and must be acceptable to all EU partners. Not all politicians labeled as "populists" are equal, however. Their positions, their ideological points of view, and their adaptability to change should thoughtfully be taken into account early on.

At the same time, influence should be exerted upon political groups and politicians who cooperate with radical parties. In the case of Slovakia, for instance, the EU partners of Smer would have to explain at length why their party supported Gasparovic, thereby giving the impression that they are approaching to extreme nationalists. After all, Smer is on good terms with the Party of European Socialists (PES). Already as observers in the European Parliament, Smer leaders Robert Fico and Monika Benova cooperated with the PES parliamentary group. After joining the EU, Smer representatives, now members, want to continue cooperating with PES. Since the two official Slovak PES parties failed in the past parliamentary elections, Smer is striving to fill the vacuum in Slovakia's social democratic segment. But Smer continues to ally itself with radicals and to canvass with nationalist slogans against national minorities like Hungarians and Romanies. It also continues to show undisguised skepticism toward the EU. As long as these activities continue, full international acceptance should be given with care.

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