

Corinne Deloy

Analysis

Towards a duel between Peter Pellegrini and Ivan Korcok in the Slovak presidential election?

The 1st round of the presidential election will take place on 23 March in Slovakia. 11 candidates are standing in this ballot. If no candidate obtains more than 50% of the votes + 1, a 2nd round will be held on 6 April. The term of office of the current President of the Republic, Zuzana Caputova, expires on 15 June next.

According to opinion polls, Peter Pellegrini (Hlas-Social Democracy), Speaker of Parliament, and Ivan Korcok, former Foreign Minister, are the favourites and are expected to meet in the 2nd round on 6 April.

"The presidential election will tell us whether Slovaks support Prime Minister Robert Fico or whether they want to curb and limit his actions," said Tim Haughton, Professor of Political Science at the University of Birmingham and an expert on Slovakia. He believes that the turnout will be crucial.

THE CANDIDATES

Eleven persons are officially running for president:

- Peter Pellegrini (Hlas-Social Democracy), supported by Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), current President of the National Council of the Republic (Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky), the single chamber of Parliament, and former Prime Minister (2018-2020);
- Ivan Korcok, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2020-2022), supported by Michal Simecka's Progressive Slovakia (PS), Milan Majersky's Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), Richard Sulík's Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), Jaroslav Nad's Democrats (D), Mikulas Dzurinda's European Blue Slovakia (M) and Ondrej Dostal's Civic Conservative Party (OKS);
- Stefan Harabin (Independent), former Minister of Justice (2006-2009) and former President of the Supreme Court (1998-2003 and 2009-2014);
- Igor Matovic (Slovensko, formerly Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO)), former Prime Minister (2020-2021);
- Patrik Dubovsky (Christian Union, KU), historian, supported by For the People (ZL), the centrist party of

former President of the Republic (2014-2019) Andrej Kiska;

- Andrej Danko (National Party, SNS), leader of this party which is a member of the government coalition;
- Marian Kotleba (People's Party-Our Slovakia, ĽSNS), party leader and former president of the Banska Bystrica region (2013-2017), located in central Slovakia;
- Krisztian Forro (Hungarian Alliance, Szövetség Aliancia), who defends the rights of minorities in Slovakia;
- Jan Kubis (independent), former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2006-2009);
- Milan Nahlik (independent), police officer;
- Robert Svec (Slovak Renewal Movement), member of a party opposed to Slovakia's membership of the European Union and NATO.

USING THE PRESIDENCY AS A COUNTERWEIGHT TO ROBERT FICO?

A victory for Peter Pellegrini would undeniably strengthen the power of Prime Minister Robert Fico. "Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini have long been members of the same party. They are ideologically close to each other," says Tim Haughton. Indeed, Peter Pellegrini left SMER-SD in July 2020; he then set up Hlas, which defines itself as being a social democratic movement, a position left vacant on the political chessboard following Robert Fico's turn to the right.

The current government, which combines SMER-SD, Hlas and the National Party (SNS), has come under fire for its plans to reform the penal code and, more broadly, the judicial system in a way that would make it more difficult to prosecute corruption and organised

Presidential election in slovakia

23th march 2024

crime cases, lighter sentences and shorter limitation periods for certain crimes, such as rape.

This project has given rise to numerous demonstrations, the largest since the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his partner Martina Kusnirova, both aged 27, on 21 February 2018^[1]. The latter led to the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico, two ministers and the head of the police in March 2018. Peter Pellegrini has repeated that he will not allow the opposition forces to make the reform of the penal code the main theme of the presidential campaign, and that the candidates have a duty to offer Slovaks a broader vision rather than a debate over a law. "A confident and proud Slovakia must be the first objective of the President of the Republic", said Peter Pellegrini, who added that *"to conceive of the Presidency as a counterweight to the government is a complete misrepresentation and would only lead to one thing: the continuation of a permanent conflict between the two heads of the executive"*.

His main opponent, Ivan Korcok, has stated that he shares the objections raised by the experts on the bill and has asserted that the people do not need the reduction in penalties and the shortening of limitation periods. He has warned that the European Union could suspend the European funds earmarked for Bratislava after the vote on the reform of the penal code because of the threats it poses to the rule of law. Ivan Korcok sees himself as Peter Pellegrini's leading opponent and a defender of liberal democracy, like the outgoing president, Zuzana Caputova.

"Slovakia needs a strong and confident President of the autonomous republic who will be able to stand up to the government. Peter Pellegrini represents the opposite of this profile," stressed Michal Simecka. His party (PS) is worried about what would happen if the current government coalition also controlled the country's presidency. *"If Peter Pellegrini is elected head of state, Slovak democracy will find itself on a slippery slope"*, said Michal Simecka.

Jaroslav Nad, leader of the Democrats (D), stressed that it was essential for his party to share with the President of the Republic the values of justice,

protection of the rule of law and democracy, principles which he believes are currently under threat from Robert Fico's government.

According to the opinion poll carried out by the Median institute at the end of February, Ivan Korcok would come out ahead in the 1st round with 36% of the vote, against Peter Pellegrini, who would garner 32.7%. They would be followed at a considerable distance by Stefan Harabin (11.2%) and Igor Matovic (4.9%).

The 2nd round polls all predict a victory for Peter Pellegrini over Ivan Korcok. Although Stefan Harabin says he does not support the candidate of the current government, it seems that around 60% of his voters would be prepared to vote for Peter Pellegrini on 6 April.

THE PRESIDENTIAL FUNCTION IN SLOVAKIA

The President of the Republic has few powers, but nevertheless plays an important role in the balance of power. Elected for 5 years, he is commander-in-chief of the armed forces; he negotiates and ratifies international agreements, promulgates laws and can grant amnesties.

Anyone wishing to stand for the supreme magistracy must collect at least 15,000 signatures from voters or those of at least 15 MPs supporting their candidacy. This second option was chosen by former Prime Minister Igor Matovic, Patrik Dubovsky and the Speaker of Parliament Peter Pellegrini to present their candidacy.

Each candidate is allowed to spend a maximum of €500,000 on his or her election campaign.

[1]Jan Kuciak was investigating suspected European subsidy fraud organised by the Italian mafia in Slovakia with the help of people close to the government for the *aktuality.sk* website, the website of the country's leading daily newspaper *Novy cas*.

Results of the presidential elections in Slovakia on 16 and 30 March 2019

Turnout: 51.26% (1st round) and 58.21% (2nd round)

Candidates	Number of votes won (1st round)	% of votes won (1st round)	Number of votes won (2nd round)	% of votes won (2nd round)
Zuzana Čaputová (Progressive Slovakia, PS)	870 415	40.57	1 056 582	58.41
Maroš Šefčovič (Direction/Social Democracy, SMER/SD)	400 379	18.66	752 403	41.59
Štefan Harabin (independent)	307 823	14.34		
Marian Kotleba (Kotleba-People's Party New Slovakia, L'SNS)	222 935	10.39		
František Mikloško, independent	122 916	5.72		
Béla Bugár (Most-Híd)	66 667	3.10		
Milan Krajniak (We are a family, SME Rodina)	59 464	2.77		
Eduard Chmelár, (independent)	58 965	2.74		
Martin Daňo, (independent)	11 146	0.51		
Róbert Švec, (independent)	6 567	0.30		
Juraj Zábajník, (independent)	6 219	0.30		
Ivan Zuzula (Slovakian Conservative Party, SKS)	3 807	0.17		
Bohumila Tauchmannová, (independent)	3 535	0.16		
Robert Mistrík, (independent)	3 318	0.15		
Jozsef Menyhart (Hungarian Coalition Party, SMK-MKP)	1 208	0.05		

source : <https://volby.statistics.sk/prez/prez2019/en/data03.html>

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Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

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