



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
The culture of political campaign
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The culture of political campaign

With the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Slovakia, which will be held in February, we can observe the intensification of the political campaign. The streets are filled with billboards with the faces of representatives of political parties, and the discussions of individual candidates are already on the television. But what is the culture of this political campaign and how do people perceive the most serious problems in society?

The first pre-election struggle, if we might call it that, was the discussion of extending the moratorium on pre-election surveys. However, the bill submitted by the ruling coalition did not pass in Parliament. The opposition openly criticized this proposal because of its restricted freedom. According to this proposal, the survey moratorium was to be extended up to 50 days. The main reason for the proposal was to prevent public opinion from being influenced by surveys, which, according to the opponents, are often distorted, because surveys are also processed by various agencies at the initiative of political parties. However, the bill found no support.

In recent months, real political struggle has begun to take place on the streets in the form of posters and billboards. Political actors focus on traditional electoral slogans such as social security, support for young families, conflict-free cooperation, and lower taxes. Individuals dominate the political campaign of the current coalition, opposition and newly formed political entities. The personalities are the ones who drive awareness of political parties. These personalities are traditionally also bearers of the values presented by the particular political party.

Thematically, the campaign is dominated by lower taxes and less state interference from the liberal Sloboda a Solidarita party (Freedom and Solidarity Party). The campaign leader of the SMER-SD party (Direction - Social Democracy) is the current Prime Minister for the first time. The campaign slogan is *Responsible change*. The PS-SPOLU coalition (Progressive Slovakia / Together) emphasises the *Fair and Proud Slovakia*. The Democratic Party campaign urges that *Decency can defeat the oligarchs*. Also, the leader of the Sme Rodina movement (We are family) shows that he is *Different from the others - he thinks with his heart*. The former president's Za ľudí party (For People) concentrates on two faces - in addition to the ex-

president, it is a former number one of the opposition movement OĽANO (Ordinary people). The party wants to *return Slovakia to all people* and calls: *Head up*. The Ordinary people (OĽANO) campaign is led by a completely new face without a political past with the slogan the party had already used in their previous campaigns - *Honestly and courageously for people*.

More radical slogans can be seen in the campaign of the populist extreme-right party ĽSNS (People's Party - Our Slovakia). It is dominated by the Christian tradition and tradition of the Slovak state, which is rather a campaign against all minorities, the position of family and women in society, anti-NATO or anti-migration rhetoric. The election slogans of the Vlast' party (Homeland) appeals to return stolen homeland to the people. This party is almost exclusively one man show.

The political campaign is also very lively on social networks, where it can respond more flexibly to everyday events. Social networks are dominated by posts - articles that, so to speak, assess the actions and opinions of political opponents, or simply confront opinions on domestic or international events. At the same time, social networks absorb a much tougher campaign that often borders on profanity. Sharing posts and statuses is common, but videos are also very popular. It is a satirical video commenting on the leaders of the opposition political parties (who are played by children), which has so far probably been the most controversial element of the SMER SD campaign. According to many, this is already a transcendence of political satire, mainly because of the fact that the video involves small children.

However, opposition parties lag behind the mobilization of the undecided voter in targeting emotions. In addition, some populist parties like to use pseudo-scientific information. These are usually statements, information or data that are often taken out of context and offered to the voters for manipulation. Thus, a lie can appear in the campaign, which is intended to raise the fear and doubts of a voter in order to influence their opinion. Topics that are misused this way are the issue of minorities, the LGBTI community, and the topic of migration. Thus, many voters who are not approached by the party's electoral leader can be addressed by the so-called election slogan. Many people do not read the election programs of the parties at all, but rather follow their own feelings and sympathy for the political party, its leader or the ideas it presents.

And what is most troubling the Slovaks before the upcoming parliamentary elections? Do these questions match the key elements in political parties' programs? In 2012, the Institute for Public Affairs organized a public survey of the most pressing issues in society. While at that

time unemployment was dominating as a residue of the global economic and financial crisis, today the situation has changed significantly. Unemployment is still perceived as a problem, but to a lesser percentage of people. In addition, the Prime Minister stressed that unemployment has also ceased to be a priority of the government, as it has a long-term downward trend, especially the unemployment of the problematic groups such as the long-term unemployed and the young unemployed. The opposite problem has arisen, namely the lack of employees in some industry sectors. That is why many workers in the automotive industry, but also in the health sector, come from abroad, especially from countries such as Serbia and Ukraine. Low internal labour mobility remains also a main objective problem of the labour market.

On the contrary, the biggest and most evident problems of the Slovak society have been corruption and healthcare. Corruption is a word that fills the lines of newspapers and magazines, particularly in connection with the revealing of scandals and the ongoing lawsuit on murder of an investigative journalist. This problem is also closely linked to the unsatisfactory functioning of the courts and the lack of law enforcement. According to a survey conducted by Focus agency in January 2020, the perception of corruption as a serious societal problem has the fastest growing trend. This increased up by 16% in 10 years. In addition to corruption, a larger percentage of people perceive political culture as a problem (specifically an 11% increase over a ten-year period). Negatively perceived are not only cases and scandals that people have the opportunity to watch on a daily basis on television, but also political rhetoric itself, that doesn't fit in a decent society.

The biggest problem in health care system is the lack of finance. People criticize the long waiting time for a specialist or planned surgeries high surcharges for drugs, corruption and discrimination of patients. Moreover, the attitude of doctors and experts towards the planned stratification of hospitals, which is to be the biggest reform of the Slovak health care system in the last 15 years, was rather negative. The vote on the proposal was postponed several times in the Parliament until the proposal was finally withdrawn. There was concern about the abuse of the topic in the election campaign, but the Minister of Health resigned because of the failure.

Unsatisfactory living standards also prevail. Although the minimum wage has increased several times, the average wage does not correspond to the level of the other developed countries of the European Union. The highest wage is, of course, concentrated in the capital city, which also offers the best job opportunities. This imbalance, however, causes considerable problems in transport and even further exacerbates the already large regional disparities.

Completely new problems have also emerged, and environmental issues are at the forefront. Recent research has shown alarming air quality in the capital city Bratislava. Interventions (especially regulated sustainable logging and pest reduction) in national parks and protected areas have also been discussed for a long time. According to Euractiv portal, however, Slovaks are concerned with excessive waste. Finally, interpersonal relationships are perceived as unsatisfactory. While society is undoubtedly getting rich, there is a family crisis, materialism, or youth cult that distort the face of today's society.

Before the elections, all political actors and parties are trying to respond to these most sensitive issues that affect every citizen. Under the pretext of transparency, they accuse each other of abusing and politicizing a particular topic. The most obvious case is clearly the issue of minorities, presented mainly by radical parties. However, the current campaign is clearly dominated by corruption and the linking of politics and financial groups to organized crime. Although this topic seems to be taken from the 1990s, the opposite is true. For the past two years, civil society in Slovakia has been activated in the streets and squares and has called for the purification of politics. There are also new actors on the political scene to draw attention to these problems and promise change. We can assess whether they gain people's trust based on their election results.