



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
Major Societal Issues of the Year 2020 Revisited
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Major Societal Issues of the Year 2020 Revisited

In the January Slovakia Social Briefing, we outlined selected events that were expected to take place in 2020. In particular, we mentioned the parliamentary elections, election of the prosecutor general, and also traditional festivities and the debate about climate change and related environmental issues. Throughout the year, we have attempted to continuously report on the most interesting and noteworthy events and issues resonating in the Slovak society, even though most of them have been directly related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The current briefing aims to look back and comment on some of them, as well as include updates where possible.

Parliamentary elections 2020

The first occasion we will hereby review is the parliamentary election taking place on the 29th of February. Members of the parliament and political parties to form the government are elected every four years. In spite of Slovakia's being a relatively small country with only around 5.5 million citizens, numbers of political parties trying to win votes have been unproportionally high for the last election periods. Some of the parties already have a long history of existence; then there is a tendency for other parties to emerge prior to the elections. In case of failure (which is very often the case), most of them simply cease to exist. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the electorate could have chosen among 25 political parties and groupings. Despite the high number of parties to choose from, for some people there was no feasible option, they said.

In order to win some seats in the National Council, a party needs to get at least 5% of the votes. The 2020 elections resulted in a variety of political parties in the Parliament. Overall, six parties gained the percentage of votes necessary, whereby they represent distinct "colours" of the political spectrum. The winning party – or rather a grouping or a movement – OĽANO (*Ordinary People and Independent Personalities*) managed to attract more than 25% of voters and found partners to form the government with. The new Prime Minister and leader of OĽANO Igor Matovič has since been criticised not only for his handling the coronavirus crisis, but also for his sometimes slightly undiplomatic rhetoric. At the moment, his opponents are demanding his resignation or an early election. On the other hand, the percentage of people that voted for him and his party is an indicator of an unhappy and unsatisfied nation, demanding a change

after politicians considered associated with corruption and other illegal activities were running the country.

In Slovakia, eligible to vote is every citizen from the age of 18. Furthermore, it is also possible to vote from the abroad. What we perceive as an issue is the unwillingness of many citizens to go to the polls – be it parliamentary elections, presidential election or election into the European Parliament. What is more, those abstaining from voting usually complain the most about what is going on in the country and what the government is doing...

COVID-19 Pandemic, Anti-Pandemic Measures and their Impacts on Gastro and Education

At the moment, more and more people are starting to express their dissatisfaction with the government's dealing with the coronavirus crisis. People are claiming that the government – and especially the Prime Minister - is failing to fight the pandemic, and that the adopted anti-pandemic measures are illogical and not thought through. Businesses most affected by the crisis are struggling to survive, begging for help from the government, but almost none is coming. Most of the pupils and student have spent the entire school (or academic) year studying from at home.

Broadly questioned or even criticised was also the decision to test the whole nation – an event of unprecedented scale, requiring enormous financial means, personnel, and logistics management. Municipalities literally had only a couple of days to ensure everything to make this happen. In the end, an unexpected number of citizens decided to have themselves tested – more than 3.5 million. The reason, however, was often not the fear of the infection, but rather the threat of compulsory quarantine in case of not taking part in the testing, hence not being allowed to go to work.

One of the measures at place during the elaboration of this text is the prohibition concerning restaurants and other gastro services to allow people inside. What is still allowed while finalising this briefing are terraces, but this will change as of December 11th. The original regulation seemed to be vague, allowing businessowners to find feasible, yet perhaps not entirely safe options. For instance, it was not clearly defined what actually a terrace was. Logically, when talking about measures aimed at lowering the possibility of being infected, a terrace should mean an open-air space. However, many owners of bars, coffee shops and restaurants have understood the notion in a different manner, namely as a space outside of the

building that can be surrounded by a tent, glass or other barrier to prevent from wind and cold. A completely closed terrace with no possibility of air fluctuation is not very different from usual gastro premises. On the other hand, it is completely understandable that restaurants and similar services were trying to serve as many customers as possible and to make them feel comfortable, as they were closed for a long time and suffered considerable financial losses. The situation seemed to have normalised in summer, but with the worsening situation in Autumn, the policy makers have decided to tighten the measures again. Starting on December 11th, even terraces must remain closed. The only possibility is take-away food.¹

As for schools and universities, these must have reoriented to online education already in the first stages of the pandemic. With the exception of the first level of primary schools (years 1-4 of the compulsory education), all pupils and students have been learning from their homes for a long time now. This situation not only represents a burden for the parents to master the new time management setup, and to partially substitute the teachers; it also hinders the possibility for children to socialise and acquire interpersonal skills. Teachers must have found new ways to deal with the sudden switch from the traditional in-person education process to the digital world. Online learning, on the one hand, can eventually contribute to the development of digital skills; on the other hand, it also highlights the differences among students and pupils in terms of their access to the necessary equipment – computers and Internet access. There are still plenty of Slovak families that cannot afford it. Moreover, many study programs – at high schools or universities – consist of a theoretical as well as practical component. The conduct of the practical part of learning has been significantly challenged.

Election of the General Prosecutor

As reminded in the introduction of this text, one of the most discussed issues in the Slovak Society has been the election of the prosecutor general. Having been elected by most of the present MPs, Maroš Žilinka was officially declared the new prosecutor general on 10th of December to serve the next 7-years term. The president of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, expressed her belief and hope that this day shall represent a new era of the prosecutor's office. The newly elected prosecutor is expected to ensure that everyone is equal

¹ Source: TASR (The News Agency of the Slovak Republic): <https://www.tasr.sk/tasr-clanok/TASR:20201209TBA02976>.

before the law. In her speech, the president pointed out the current state of the prosecutor's office, formed as an entity of its own – a state inside a state. This is expected to change now.²

Christmas as Merry as Possible

It is obvious that this year's Christmas will be considerably impacted by the pandemic. As thousands of people have become redundant at work or have been forced to close their businesses, it will be impossible in many families to allow to arrange everything for the Christmas festivities, such as getting presents for their children and relatives. Even sadder is the fact that many families will be missing somebody at the Christmas Eve dinner, not only due to measures aimed at social distancing and restricting gatherings of more than 6 people, but also because of the losses of their loved ones. According to the latest anti-pandemic measures, there will be no lockdown during Christmas.

Perhaps a little more positive has been the initiative called "*How much love can a shoe box contain?*"³ For the third time already, people had the opportunity to make Christmas a little merrier for those who may have no one to share this magical time with, namely seniors from the retirement homes. Several weeks before Christmas, the social media were filled with posts and pictures of nicely wrapped boxes including various little presents, such as candies, cosmetics, socks, hand towels, frequently accompanied by (handmade) Christmas postcards or letters. Even several schools contributed to this initiative. Each year, more and more people participate. During this year's edition, almost 23,000 boxes were collected.⁴ At the moment, they are being distributed to the senior homes. As contradictory as it may sound, we suppose, this year's edition has been an enormous success also due to the pandemic, which has been intensifying the feelings of loneliness among certain people, but also the feelings of solidarity and desire to help those who really need it.

Except for the above-mentioned initiative, there are further ways how to help. Several civic associations are organizing charity runs to raise money for children; collections of grocery

² Source: TASR (The News Agency of the Slovak Republic): <https://www.tasr.sk/tasr-clanok/TASR:20201210TBB00200>.

³ Author's loose translation from the original Slovak name: "*Koľko lásky sa zmestí do krabice od topánok?*"

⁴ For more information about the initiative see: <https://www.kolkolasky.sk/>.

products for those in material need, such as the homeless; or auctions to support sheltered animals – also they can be recipients of support.

To conclude, now as the Christmas is already all around, let us be truly solidary towards each other. And, provided we can, let us help to make this time a little more pleasant for anybody who may not be as lucky as we are.