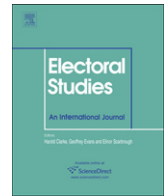




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Notes on Recent Elections

The 2009 presidential election in Slovakia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 July 2009

Accepted 1 September 2009

In March and April 2009 Slovak electors decided on their head of state in the third election since 1999. It was the first nationwide electoral contest since the 2006 parliamentary election, so the results were a litmus test of the popularity of the main governing and opposition parties. The incumbent president Ivan Gašparovič convincingly won in the runoff and became the first Slovak president to be re-elected.

1. Background

Gašparovič's election in 2004 and his re-election in 2009 differ in several respects. Most importantly, in 2004 he was a surprising winner, elected on the ticket of an extra-parliamentary party and with the verbal support of the then major opposition party, Direction – Social Democracy (Smer). In 2009, Gašparovič was the favourite from the outset and was supported by Smer and the Slovak National Party (SNS). Secondly, in 2004 he was a champion of social redistributionist and national (ethnic Slovak) values against the incumbent neo-liberal government which included an ethnic Hungarian minority party. However, during Gašparovič's first presidential term, the centre-right coalition government was defeated in the parliamentary election; hence, after the 2006 parliamentary election, Gašparovič's supporters, including Smer and SNS, occupied crucial positions in the executive. The wholesale alternation in the government's composition reflected a shift amongst the electorate towards redistributionist and social protectionist policies (Haughton and

Rybář, 2008). Thus the political environment shifted in favour of the incumbent president between 2006 and 2009.

The president is directly elected by a popular vote. If no one wins outright on the first round, a second round is held between the two lead candidates within two weeks. The Slovak constitution provides for a presidential office with significant prerogatives, especially in foreign policy, and the appointment of the prime minister, public officials, and government ministers.¹ The *de facto* presidential powers are rather weak, however: presidents regularly delegate foreign policy to the cabinet; and their appointment powers are limited because the cabinet depends on the support of parliament, not the president. In short, the president's powers can often be executed only with the assent of other actors (Malová and Rybář, 2008). Overall, the performance of the president is largely conditioned by his determination to voice his opinions to electors.

During Gašparovič's first presidential term, he rarely opposed the policies and decisions of the incumbent government. He preferred to cultivate his image of a popular president close to the average man, frequently appearing at various sport and cultural events. His self-restrained approach to politics continued after the government changed in 2006 (Malová and Učeň, 2007). This time, however, he often emphasised that the social and economic policies of the new government were more in line with his political preferences than with the pre-2006 centre-right government. Unlike his activist predecessor, Rudolf Schuster, who missed no opportunity to inform the public about his opinions, Gašparovič kept a low profile,

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¹ According to the constitution of Slovakia, Ministers do not have to be elected.

playing the role of a ceremonial head of state without active involvement in everyday politics.

2. Presidential candidates

There were only two contenders with realistic chances of being elected: President Gašparovič and Iveta Radičová. Gašparovič secured support from the main governing party Smer, and from SNS, one of its junior coalition partners. The parliamentary opposition nominated Iveta Radičová, a former Minister of Social Affairs (2005–2006) and an MP since 2006, to represent the largest opposition party, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ). Radičová has been the most popular opposition politician even among a significant number of voters supporting the governing parties. Bearing in mind that the lack of coordination among the centre-right led to their defeat in the 2004 presidential election (Rybář, 2005), SDKÚ managed to persuade other parliamentary opposition parties – the Christian Democrats (KDH) and the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) – to support Radičová.

There were five other candidates. A breakaway conservative faction of the Christian Democrats nominated their own candidate, František Mikloško, an MP and a parliamentary veteran. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), a junior coalition partner, took a half-way approach: it refused to support both Gašparovič and Radičová, but did not nominate its chairman and the most popular politician, Vladimír Mečiar.² Instead, Mečiar pressed for the nomination of non-party Milan Melník, who had no political experience and little support even among HZDS voters. Among the candidates of the three lesser parties, only Zuzana Martináková of the Free Forum (SF), once a deputy chairwoman of the SDKÚ, had the potential to shuffle the cards in the presidential contest.

3. Election campaign

The legal framework of the campaign changed little compared with the 2004 presidential election. The official campaign takes place during the 15-day period before the first round of voting, but campaigning is proscribed within 48 h before the polling stations open. The electoral law sets the spending limit of €132,775 per round, each round being treated separately. All the candidates used the opportunity to address the electorate via public as well as private TV stations, which are permitted to allocate limited and equal time for political advertisements.

Compared with the 2004 election, the media played a major role in informing the public about the candidates. All nationwide electronic media organised debates between the candidates, especially the TV 'duels' before the second round. It was also the first campaign in Slovakia involving the Internet: all major candidates 'aired' their advertisements on various Internet websites. The civic initiative Our President, set up by non-party activists to

support Iveta Radičová – to collect donations and seek volunteers – was probably the largest on-line political initiative in the election.

Presidential candidates do not prepare formal election manifestoes,³ but the situation was different in 2009 as the candidates were prompted to present their views on strategies to tackle the ongoing economic crisis. However, these themes were overshadowed by other issues. Martináková and Mikloško, the candidates of the minor parties, focused their campaigns on appeals to social liberal and socially conservative voters, respectively. Before the first round, Mikloško repeatedly accused Radičová of moral relativism and criticised Gašparovič for backsliding on democracy during the 1990s. Martináková, for her part, targeted Gašparovič's passivity in office and pointed to Radičová's lack of experience. Gašparovič, whose lead in the opinion polls amounted to more than 10 points (SITA, 2009), kept a low profile, portraying himself as an experienced incumbent whose role was to provide political stability. Radičová's main message was "a new political decency": that is, a cooperative and conflict-free approach to political opponents, expertise in social affairs, and preparedness to work with all political parties. Indeed, she offered future cooperation with the leading government party Smer, the main political sponsor of Gašparovič. The leaders of the three opposition parties played only a small public role in her campaign strategy, a deliberate attempt to minimize the effects of the government-opposition dynamics in the election.

The dynamics of the campaign changed following the results of the first round, which showed less than Gašparovič's expected lead. Smer's leader and Prime Minister, Róbert Fico, resolutely refused any cooperation with Radičová, which brought the government-opposition contest back into the campaign. In addition, Fico and several government ministers announced a number of new policy initiatives and everyday political decisions in Gašparovič's presence to demonstrate the active role of the incumbent president in government policy-making. At the same time, the junior coalition partner SNS accused Radičová of drawing excessively on support from the ethnic Hungarian Coalition Party; SNS representatives even mobilized their supporters with claims that it was unacceptable for (Slovakia's) Hungarians to decide the future Slovak president (Vagovič, 2009).⁴ Gašparovič's closeness to the left-dominated government and Radičová's alleged cooperation with ethnic Hungarian political leaders became Gašparovič's mantra before the second round. Compared to the first round debates, Gašparovič was more active and his more aggressive style was amplified by Radičová's determination to run a "clean campaign" without the tools of negative campaigning.

² The three-time prime minister was defeated in the presidential runoffs in 1999 and 2004, but decided not to stand in the election as his popularity has declined dramatically over the last decade.

³ The 2004 presidential election did not feature substantial policy debates but focused on the candidates' personal qualities and their ability to represent the country.

⁴ The SNS leaders acknowledged that they paid for advertisements accusing Radičová of supporting the establishment of territorial autonomy for Slovakia's Hungarian community.

Table 1Results of the presidential election in Slovakia, 21 March and 4 April 2009. Source: Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, <http://www.statistics.sk>.

Candidate	First round votes	First round %	Second round votes	Second round %
Gašparovič, Ivan (non-party)	876,061	46.70	1,234,787	55.53
Radičová, Iveta (SDKÚ-DS)	713,735	38.05	988,808	44.47
Mikloško, František (KDS)	101,573	5.41		
Martináková, Zuzana (SF)	96,035	5.12		
Melník, Milan (ĽS-HZDS)	45,958	2.45		
Bollová, Dagmara (non-party)	21,378	1.13		
Sidor, Milan (KSS)	20,862	1.11		
Turnout	1,893,439	43.63	2,242,162	51.67
Electorate	4,339,331		4,339,257	
Invalid votes	17,810	0.94	18,567	0.83

4. Results

Turnout in the first round reached 43.6%, rising to 51.7% in the second round, which testified to the effectiveness of Gašparovič's and Radičová's mobilisation campaigns. More importantly, Gašparovič's lead after the first round even increased in the runoff, defeating his opponent by 10 percentage points (55.5–44.5%) (see Table 1).

In the absence of detailed opinion polls, it is difficult to judge what factors determined Gašparovič's clear victory. His net increase in votes between the two rounds was higher than that of Radičová, which suggests that Gašparovič convinced his voters that the presidential election was, in fact, a contest between a left-leaning government and the centre-right opposition. At a videotape from his meeting with Smer's activists, leaked to the media, Gašparovič, an allegedly non-party president, claimed that his re-election was crucial for the party and that he acted "as if" he was a member of Smer. Active support from the popular prime minister and other ministers sharply contrasted with an absence of unpopular opposition party leaders from Radičová's campaign.

The election again demonstrated the importance of the ethnic cleavage in Slovak politics. Slovakia's Hungarian minority and its political leaders represent a convenient and easy target for at least one party (SNS) and a significant share of its voters. It was Gašparovič's successful combination of positive and (third party) negative campaigning that was eventually more effective than Radičová's carefully constructed image of a political newcomer running a clean campaign.

5. Implications

Gašparovič's re-election meant that the political status quo would be preserved at least until the parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2010. His victory was a success for the government and for its leading party Smer, ensuring the unchallenged continuation of its government mandate. Probably the main loser was the once dominant HZDS. The crushing defeat of its official candidate, Milan Melník, was in fact a failure of the party's leader, Vladimír Mečiar; his

waning charisma and the continuous decline in his electoral support suggests that HZDS may not even enter the next parliament.

The implications are equally significant for the opposition. Radičová was considered a likely replacement of the current SDKÚ leader, Mikuláš Dzurinda for the 2010 parliamentary election. However, she had to back down shortly after the presidential election, as leading figures in the party refused to support her bid for the party's leadership. Moreover, within a few weeks following the presidential contest, Radičová voted in a parliamentary vote on behalf of a colleague who could not manage to register her vote within the time limit. She apologized publicly for breaking parliamentary standing rules and resigned her seat – an unprecedented decision in Slovakia's parliament. Nonetheless, she remained the deputy chair of SDKÚ and confirmed that she would stand in the next parliamentary election.

In all, unlike previous presidential contests, the 2009 election did not bring a new dynamic into party competition. Rather, they consolidated the existing distribution of political power among the key political players. The re-election of President Gašparovič a year before the scheduled parliamentary election testifies to the continued dominance of the leftist and nationalist parties that have controlled all major political positions since the 2006 parliamentary election.

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