

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR SLOVAKIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Presidential race to come down to clash between social democratic ex-PM and former centre-right FM


19 March 2024

SUMMARY

Central & Eastern Europe's crowded 2024 election season will kick off later this week in Slovakia, where voters will head to the polls on 23rd March to elect the country's next head of state, to succeed outgoing President Zuzana Čaputová. Although the election campaign features eleven different candidates, it seems poised to come down to a clash between the two frontrunners: centre-left ex-PM and current Speaker of Parliament Peter Pellegrini and former centre-right Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok.

Recent polls suggest Pellegrini is the favourite to win the first round but unlikely to secure more than half of the popular vote, meaning a run-off vote to be held on 6th April. Given the tight race between the two frontrunners, both Pellegrini and Korčok have a good chance of becoming President, but much will depend on potential endorsements from rival candidates.

A Pellegrini Presidency would most likely mean an uninterrupted legislative process for Prime Minister Robert Fico's coalition government. By contrast, a win for his centre-right challenger will likely see clashes between the Cabinet and the Presidential office, similar to the testing relationship that exists between Fico's cabinet and President Čaputová.

 Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at the Slovak presidential election campaign, the factors most likely to shape the electoral contest, as well as the possible forward scenarios.

A CROWDED PRESIDENTIAL RACE

On 23rd March, Slovak voters will head to the polls to elect the country's next President. With incumbent President Zuzana Čaputová not seeking re-election, the Presidential race will see eleven candidates with different political and ideological backgrounds competing to succeed her as head of state. Despite the crowded field, the election will likely come down to a clash between centre-left ex-Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, the current Speaker of Parliament and the leader of the social democratic Hlas-SD party, and Ivan Korčok, a former centre-right Foreign Minister, who is running as an independent.

Pellegrini is the endorsed candidate of Prime Minister Robert Fico's senior coalition Smer-SD party, while Korčok is supported by the centrist-liberal Progressive Slovakia (PS), the country's leading opposition party, as well as by other centre-right and liberal parliamentary formations, including the Christian democratic KDH and the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS). The [latest polls](#) suggest Pellegrini is the favourite to win the first round, with 35-40% of the popular vote against Korčok's 30-35%. However, [other polls](#), conducted in early March, put Korčok in the lead. Although at the time of writing it remains unclear who will finish first in the polls in the first round, neither candidate is expected to secure more than half of the popular vote, meaning that the two finalists will clash again in a run-off vote on 6th April.

In this regard, a key development to monitor is whether Pellegrini or Korčok will be endorsed by the remaining presidential contenders. These include former Supreme Court Chairman Štefan Harabin, centre-right ex-PM Igor Matovič (2020-2021), former Slovak FM Jan Kubiš, Hungarian minority representative Krisztián Forró, Andrej Danko, the Chairman of the junior coalition nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), historian Patrik Dubovský, far-right leader Marian Kotleba, police officer-turned-politician Milan Náhlik and Róbert Švec, an anti-EU/NATO figure.

A SUBDUED ELECTION CAMPAIGN

With only a few days to go until the first round of the vote, the Presidential election campaign, characterized as subdued by local observers, seems to be only of partial interest to the Slovak electorate. Notably, the last Presidential election in 2019 also registered a relatively low turnout: 48% in the first round and 41% in the second.

As for the two frontrunners, centre-right ex-FM Korčok is seeking to address patriotic sentiments in the once prominent centre-right voter base by engaging with regions that harbor strong support for nationalist and/or far-right movements. Radical right-wing candidates in the Presidential race underscore the presence of a decades-long nationalist sentiment among a share of Slovak voters, while the absence of a clear "systemic nationalist candidate" has bolstered the popularity of former CC judge Štefan Harabin, currently polling third with 8-11%. Consequently, Korčok's quest to pick up the nationalist vote will likely prove unsuccessful, also due to his affiliation with centre-right and liberal formations, which disqualifies him in the eyes of working-class nationalist voters.

Meanwhile, Korčok's centre-left (and establishment) challenger, Pellegrini, is campaigning on the promise of integrity and predictability, pointing to the past three years which have brought not only widespread domestic political uncertainty over the instability of three consecutive centre-right governments¹, but also global crises such as the pandemic and the economic downturn, leading to social discord and a decline in Slovak living standards.

¹ See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of Slovakia's political instability in recent years from May 2023

RECENT CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT TO IMPACT ELECTION OUTCOME

The Presidential election comes only six months after Slovakia's last parliamentary elections. Held last October, the election resulted in the return of former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his centre-left-turned-populist Smer-SD party, which currently governs² the country in a coalition with Pellegrini's centre-left Hlas-SD and Danko's nationalist SNS.

Notably, Fico, who promised stability following years of short-lived centre-right governments, ran on a Kremlin-friendly platform, vowing not to send arms to war-torn Ukraine. While he eventually did not oppose EU financial aid to Ukraine for 2024-2027, his stance on Russia's war – calling for immediate peace talks – continues to be a subject of criticism from Ukraine's international allies. Most recently, the Czech government cancelled inter-governmental consultations with the Fico Cabinet over Slovak Foreign Minister Juráj Blahar's recent meeting with his Russian counterpart in Türkiye.

With Pellegrini running as the de facto candidate of the ruling bloc, the Presidential election could be viewed as a referendum on the performance of the Fico Government. Although SNS leader Danko is also running as a ruling party candidate, his run is rather intended to elevate his party's positions in the Fico Government, in which the SNS is a junior coalition partner.

Six months after its formation, PM Fico's latest government is facing considerable domestic criticism around key issues. These include lowering penalties for corruption, a visible departure from pro-Western foreign policies, and recently proposed changes to the functioning of the country's state media, which critics say undermine media freedom. At the same time, the new cabinet has also delivered certain results, including proposed changes in construction laws that could expedite the construction of highways and railway lines, as well as facilitating stable energy prices for households. Accordingly, support for the ruling parties is largely unchanged since last October.

POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS

Given the tight race between the two frontrunners, both Pellegrini and Korčok have a good chance of succeeding outgoing President Čaputová. Much will depend on whether they can secure the support of rival candidates in the second round: Harabin, Danko and Švec would most likely support Pellegrini if asked, while Dubovský is more likely to support Korčok.

Aretera's baseline scenario assumes that Pellegrini will become Slovakia's next President after a closely contested run-off vote. Pellegrini remains one of the most popular politicians in the country, while Korčok may be hurt by his association with the Matovič Government, one of the most unpopular governments in the country's recent history. Since SNS leader Andrej Danko, also a presidential contender, will likely fall out of the race after the first round, Pellegrini is likely to pick up the endorsement of his party's junior coalition partner, potentially in exchange for an elevated position for the SNS in the Fico Government. The former centre-left ex-PM may also benefit from his moderate public figure image. A Pellegrini Presidency would likely also mean a smooth legislative process for the Fico Government, although the former PM – in an effort to demonstrate his independence – may distance himself from the government on certain issues, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, corruption and the situation of the public media. However, there is a low to minimal chance that Pellegrini would be in strong opposition to the Fico Government if elected.

² See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the Fico Government from October 2023

Equally possible, however, is a win by his main challenger. Although running as an independent, Ivan Korčok is likely to benefit from the endorsement of Progressive Slovakia, the country's largest opposition formation, as well as support from other parliamentary parties, including the centre-right KDH and SaS parties. Recent public discontent with the Fico Government over its alleged push to curb media freedom and failure to tackle corruption may also benefit Pellegrini's centre-right challenger.

If elected President, Korčok is certain to clash with the Fico Government along various ideological and policy differences, which could take shape in rejecting parliament-approved laws and government-approved candidates to lead public authorities. A Korčok victory would also result in a President likely to follow in the footsteps of outgoing President Čaputová as a vocally pro-EU/NATO and pro-Ukrainian head of state.

Since 1999, Slovak presidential elections have often revolved around the portrayal of one candidate as detrimental to society, leading voters to rally behind the perceived 'lesser evil', which could again be the case in the upcoming Presidential election. Following the fall of autocratic Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in 1999, his reputation as a figure contributing to Slovakia's negative image led to widespread distrust among the population, despite his victory in parliamentary elections at the time. This sentiment contributed to his losses in both the 1999 and 2004 presidential elections.

PM Fico faced a similar challenge in 2014 as his alleged accumulation of power, populist turn and allegations of corruption have undermined public confidence in his government. Despite winning the first round of the Presidential election in 2014, he ultimately lost to centre-right challenger Andrej Kiska in the second round. Public discontent with his party also had a profound impact on the 2019 Presidential elections, which came a year after the murder of Ján Kuciak, an investigative journalist focusing on uncovering corruption within the country's ruling elite. Notably, mass protests forced Fico to resign in February 2018, while Maroš Šefčovič, Smer's candidate in the previous Presidential election, also lost to Zuzana Čaputová.

In the current election cycle, the governing coalition's nomination of a candidate with ties to Smer could reflect the trend outlined above. Widespread antipathy towards Smer, coupled with Peter Pellegrini's association with the party as its former PM and vice-chairman, may hinder his chances despite his relative popularity. Korčok, lacking ties to Fico's party, may be the likely beneficiary of this sentiment, potentially securing victory in the second round by being perceived as the lesser evil.

IMPACT ON THE GOVERNING COALITION

Should Korčok win the election, Pellegrini is widely expected to stay on as Speaker of Parliament. Consequently, the junior coalition SNS, whose leader Andrej Danko is also a former Speaker (2016-2020), would likely not seek to replace him. Consequently, the current government would likely be more stable and united in opposition to Korčok.

As for the parliamentary opposition, his victory would mean securing a key ally as Korčok could potentially veto contentious or controversial legislation and serve as a counterbalance to the domestic and foreign policies of the Fico Government. While the President holds little executive power, former President Kiska and outgoing President Čaputová have both demonstrated that a strong head of state, who stands against the incumbent government, could galvanize support for some opposition formations.


If Pellegrini were to succeed Čaputová, he would face two options as President. Under Aretera's assessment, the first option (though improbable) would see him attempting to convince the public that he is not influenced by Fico's Smer as head of state. This could take shape by not endorsing every legislative proposal put forward by the Smer-Hlas-SNS coalition. However, it seems more likely that Pellegrini – due to his party's presence in the ruling coalition – may opt not to take actions that could undermine the incumbent Cabinet, instead striving to foster unity among Slovak citizens. Nevertheless, given the deep-seated anti-establishment sentiment prevalent in Slovak society, it is improbable that Pellegrini would succeed in garnering widespread support.

Under a Pellegrini Presidency, tension within the ruling coalition may arise from differences with Andrej Danko's SNS party, which hopes to secure a greater role in the country's three-party coalition. However, Pellegrini is unwilling to relinquish his position, as it was not part of the coalition agreement. While it is highly unlikely for the coalition behind the Fico Cabinet to dissolve over this specific issue, it could nonetheless serve as a catalyst for future disagreements that may pose internal threats to the coalition's stability.

Pellegrini has indicated that – in the event of his departure – the Speaker's position would likely be filled by a high-ranking Hlas figure, such as Economy Minister Denisa Saková or Richard Raši, the country's Minister for Informatization and Regional Development. Saková and Raši are also contenders for leadership positions within Pellegrini's party, thus his election as President will likely trigger a power struggle for key positions within the second most influential party behind the Fico Government.

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If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
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