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The Slovak Presidential Election, May 1999

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On 29th May 1999, Rudolf Schuster, Mayor of Kosice, and founder and leader of the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), became the second democratically elected President of Slovakia in a second round run-off. The results may appear to represent a solid victory and, indeed, 'mission accomplished' for Schuster, defending the four-party coalition that had come to power after defeating Vladimir Mečiar at the parliamentary elections the previous September.¹ As discussed below, however, his victory was not perhaps as convincing as the raw numbers might imply, not least because a second round was necessary.

1. Background

This was the first popular election of the President, the only previous incumbent having been elected by Parliament. The issue of the presidency had been ceaselessly and explosively controversial ever since the founding of the independent Slovak state in January 1993 (Fitzmaurice, 1998). The constitution, adopted in great haste in late 1992 as Czechoslovakia was breaking up, had given quite considerable and independent powers to the President. This seemed ill-suited to what was otherwise a parliamentary system, which allowed for the indirect election of the President by a three-fifths majority in Parliament. Worse, there was constitutional provision for a three-fifths majority in Parliament to remove the President at any time and on any grounds, making removal

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¹ For the 1998 parliamentary election, see Fitzmaurice (1999).

a political matter rather than giving Parliament impeachment powers. In the case of an interregnum, the powers of the President fall to the Prime Minister.

The first President, Vladimir Kovac, was the personal choice of Prime Minister Mečiar, having been one of his close political allies. Rather like Thomas à Becket, once elected he took his duties as defender of the constitution and the rule of law seriously. This swiftly brought him into conflict with the authoritarian Mečiar (Fitzmaurice, 1998, p. 73), conflict that intensified after the clear complicity of Kovac in the first removal of Mečiar in 1994. This led Mečiar, in turn, to try to remove Kovac from office, which was strenuously resisted by both the President himself and the opposition parties. These wranglings persisted throughout the 1994–98 legislative term, but at no point was there a three-fifths majority for his removal. Nor, when Kovac's term expired in March 1998, was there a majority to elect a candidate either from the opposition or the government side. As a result, the Presidency remained vacant, and at the time of the parliamentary elections in September 1998, its powers, including the key power to nominate a Prime Minister, were—perhaps dangerously—in Mečiar's hands. Had the victory of the opposition in these parliamentary elections been less decisive, he might have been able to use that power to divide the opposition and continue in power (Fitzmaurice, 1998 p. 31).

The opposition had responded by trying to organise a referendum initiative to introduce popular election of the President. The necessary 350,000 signatures were collected easily, but the referendum, which was linked with another plebiscite on NATO membership, was sabotaged by the Interior Minister and aborted (Fitzmaurice (1999: 292). The opposition parties therefore went into the election with a commitment to introduce direct election of the President if they won power. While in opposition, this had been a valuable issue around which to build opposition unity, as well as a stick with which to beat Mečiar and to damage his standing both at home and abroad.

Although the commitment to a popularly elected President had been clear, as had the declaration that Rudolf Schuster should be the coalition's candidate, once in power the coalition was hesitant. To proceed with the election at all involved a calculated risk. On the one hand, the government might be able to present the election simply as a confirmation of its victory in the previous September, with Schuster carried into office on the same wave of support. On the other hand, the election might have turned into a very early manifestation of 'mid-term blues' for the new government; certainly, Schuster's support could easily be compared with the results obtained by the four parties of the coalition at the parliamentary election. The coalition parties may have been encouraged to take the risk by Mečiar's apparent decision to leave politics after his defeat in the parliamentary elections. As it happened, however, the election offered an open invitation to Mečiar to return to the arena, which he duly did.

The legislation for organising the election was adopted in January 1999. It provided for a second round run-off between the top two contenders if no candidate won 50% of the vote in the first round. As agreed, the coalition parties immediately nominated Schuster. On 9 April, only just before the close of nominations on April 13th, Mečiar was nominated by the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS).

2. Candidates and the campaign

In all, eight other candidates were nominated, but there were only four ‘serious’ contenders in the field: Schuster, Mečiar, Vasaryova, and former President, Kovac. Schuster, a prominent figure with a long political record, was nominated by the coalition. Now 65, he joined the Communist Party at the age of 30, and worked as a party apparatchik in the Kosice area. He became Mayor of Kosice, Slovakia’s second city, a member of the Politburo and an MP, and was chair of the (still Communist) Slovak National Council during the 1989–90 transition period. Subsequently Schuster became Ambassador to Canada, but was removed in 1992 following the restrictions placed on former Communists in the Slovak administration. In 1994, he was again elected Mayor of Kosice. In April 1998, he founded SOP, publicising the party and himself via the independent press and commercial television. This ‘virtual party’, a creation of the media, soon reached 15% levels of support in the opinion polls, although it only achieved 8% in the election. Schuster was a charismatic figure, whose aim had always been to run for the Presidency. He succeeded in establishing a centre-left niche within the opposition, and SOP entered the coalition in September 1998.

Vladimir Mečiar is the ‘comeback kid’ of Slovak politics. Recognised as a tough political fighter, he is a strongly nationalist and authoritarian populist. Defeated as Prime Minister in September 1998, he appeared ready to bow out of politics. In the event, Mečiar claims that his return was incited by the unjust arrest of Ivan Lexa, former head of the Slovak secret services. Probably more likely is that he saw an opportunity to reverse his defeat, and to prevent the government from investigating some of the murkier features of his regime. Either way, his vote share in the presidential election indicates that he remains a very popular figure in Slovakia.

The third candidate, and the only woman, was an independent, although with a clear stance on the Catholic right. Even so, it is suggested that Magda Vasaryova gained a degree of support simply by dint of being an independent and a woman.

Had he remained a candidate, former President Kovac might have received a substantial share of the first round vote. A percentage in double figures would certainly have significantly dented support for Schuster; some might indeed have preferred Kovac to be the coalition candidate. Ultimately, however, his campaign outside the coalition was doomed to failure and he withdrew on May 11, throwing his support behind Schuster in order to block Mečiar.

Throughout the campaign, the coalition sought to emphasise that the presidential poll was a confirmatory plebiscite for or against the outcome of the parliamentary elections. This enabled the coalition to avoid moving onto Mečiar’s preferred agenda, namely the government’s record in office since its election nine months earlier. This was important given the sense in public opinion that the government had not moved as far and as fast as had been hoped and expected. The personal aspect of the contest was also downplayed by the coalition, because of the danger of division.² Schuster

² Indeed, Mečiar was a past master in dividing what had, until 1998, been the opposition.

Table 1
Results of the presidential election

	1st round (15 May 1999) (%)	2nd round (29 May 1999) (%)
Rudolf Schuster	47.4	57.2
Vladimir Mečiar	37.2	42.8
Magda Vasaryova	6.4	–
Others	8.8	–
Total	100.0	100.0
Turnout	73.9%	74.5%

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

had not been equally popular with all the coalition partners. Firmly supported in the Democratic Party of the Left (SDL), his candidacy was met with mutterings of dissent on the Catholic right. Indeed, Vasaryova's candidacy had come from that quarter, although of course she did not have official SDK support. Maintaining unity could best be achieved by emphasising the plebiscitary nature of the election. The coalition handled these strategic matters effectively during the campaign.

Mečiar's chief tactic was to try to divide the coalition. He attacked the 'Slovak parties' (Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK, SOP, and SDL) for including the Slovak Hungarian Coalition (SMK) in the coalition. He drew attention to rising unemployment and the government's support for NATO in the Kosovo war. Mečiar was of course handicapped by his own record, and by the fact that he no longer controlled the media and was unable to set the agenda. The loss of support experienced by the coalition between the two elections was eventually quite limited, but such is the mesmerising character of Mečiar that there was throughout the campaign a degree of unease in the coalition camp. In part, that may have been useful in avoiding apathy and complacency. And, charismatic though he is, there remained the fact that, among the coalition's core electorate, antipathy towards Mečiar was the strongest basis of support for Schuster.

3. Results

The results of the presidential election were, some might argue, decisively enough in favour of Schuster (see Table 1). He won 57.2% in the second round, very close to the 58.2% won by the four coalition parties in September 1998. Yet, it could be argued, he ought to have done even better, perhaps even winning in the first ballot, bearing in mind his charismatic impact in 1998. The coalition had sought confirmation of the parliamentary election result, and this was delivered, but they might have hoped to build on that support. The result also demonstrated that Mečiar remained a potent force in Slovak politics. However, if the coalition remains intact, and delivers on its pledges to move Slovakia towards reform and towards Europe, then Mečiar's moment may prove to have passed. The coalition's future is therefore in its own hands.

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The 1999 Parliamentary Election in Iceland

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A parliamentary election was held in Iceland on 8 May 1999. Undoubtedly the most interesting feature of the election was the attempt to form a united party of the left, which was supposed to provide a substantial counterweight to the conservative Independence Party. However, the election results leave unclear the extent to which the experiment succeeded.

1. A new force on the left?

In north-European terms, the Icelandic party system has been characterised by a strong conservative party, comparable in strength to the Scandinavian Social Democrats, a united centre, dominated by the provincial Progressive Party, and a fragmented and electorally weak left wing. The major parties of the left have seldom polled more than a quarter or third of the vote between them, and the socialist People's Alliance has usually outdone the Social Democratic Party. Splits have frequently affected the left, and most of the occasional fifth or sixth parties in Icelandic politics have been left-wing. In 1995, for example, apart from the two main left-wing parties mentioned above, two others won seats in the Althingi (parliament): the People's Movement, a splinter group from the Social Democrats; and the Women's Alliance, a broadly left-wing party established in 1983.

Although the Icelandic left has thus been characterised by splits rather than mergers, the ideal of a single left-wing party has persisted since the 1930s. The striking contrast with the hegemony of social democracy in Scandinavia was a constant

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