

EU MONITOR

The new Slovak government: An exemplary
to the rest of the V4 amidst global crises?

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- The results of Slovak presidential and European elections in 2019 indicated a political change in Slovakia, distancing itself from a twelve year-long dominance of ruling party SMER, which got embroiled in many corruption scandals throughout its reign. Firstly, [the presidential elections](#) in March 2019 appointed Zuzana Čaputová to President, defeating SMER's candidate Maroš Šefčovič. She took hold of the office as an explicit advocate for multilateralism, anti-corruption and a more liberal direction for the country, stating that her "main focus is to bring about change in Slovakia, and for Slovakia to be a reliable and predictable partner of the European Union", while having an "inspirational effect" to other European countries in this regard¹. Secondly, two months later, the coalition PS-SPOLU (whose former vice-president is Čaputová) [noticeably won](#) the elections to the European Parliament, with its programme promising a "real European Slovakia" and an intention to actively participate in the EU's development and unity². The coalition's success marked another election lost by SMER in a row and subsequently offered the possibility of further political upheaval in the upcoming elections.
- The composition of the new government coalition arising from the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections confirmed the change of political leadership in the country, thus bringing a potential for change as it consists of the parties of previous opposition and defined itself against its predecessor. This paper will analyse the new government's programme and policies specifically pertaining to rule of law and green transformation vis-à-vis their feasibility in the context of contemporary developments. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the beginning of the rule of the new government and is going to affect the real shape of its original political plans and reforms due to significant impact on Slovak economy. Moreover, the paper will reflect if these developments are likely to be significant in the Visegrad 4 context.

Outcome of the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections

The new Slovak government was assembled under the lead of party OĽANO (“Ordinary people and independent personalities”), appointing Igor Matovič in a position of the new Prime Minister, which came out as the winner of the Slovak parliamentary elections taking place on 29th February 2020. [The results](#) of these elections confirmed the previously mentioned trend of changing Slovak political landscape, resulting in a progressive shift.³

[The programme of the new government](#)⁴, composed by the parties OĽANO⁵, Sme Rodina⁶ (“We are family”), SaS⁷ (“Freedom and solidarity”) and Za ľudí⁸ (“For people”), was negotiated, created and published under the pressure of a coronavirus pandemic crisis in

Slovakia, as the new government found itself in an unprecedented difficult position when taking office.

The new government’s programme – potential for much-needed reforms

Once formed, the government coalition listed several of its key priorities, reflecting their parties’ pre-election programmes. Strong emphasis on anti-corruption measures, reliable judiciary, healthy economy and business environment, fair social system, reform of healthcare and educational systems, as well as a formulation of a clear pro-multilateralism orientation of the country were listed. Moreover, the plan also focuses on the protection of the environment and declared that the country’s economic growth should be respecting ecology. This paper will focus primarily on two chosen

¹ Mortkowitz, S. (2019). Political outsider wins Slovakia’s presidential election. Retrieved at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/political-outsider-wins-slovakias-presidential-election-zuzana-caputova-maros-sefcovic/>

² PS-SPOLU (n.d.). European programme. Retrieved at: <https://progresivnespolu.sk/bod-zlomu/europsky-program>

³ Such change is after all going to have to take place without participation of the coalition PS-SPOLU, which was initially the one indicating the progressive shift in Slovakia with seemingly sufficient support among Slovak citizens, after being successful in both previous elections in 2019. Despite of the [big ambitions of its leadership](#) aiming for the Prime Minister’s seat, it barely missed the election threshold of 7%, missing only [0,04 %](#) to enter the parliament.

⁴ Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024 (2020). Retrieved at: http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/Programove%20vyhlasenie_cele%20zmenie_2020-2024

⁵ Center-right party with populist tendencies.

⁶ Sme Rodina is harder to define, as its leader perceives the party as right-wing, but it tends to be leftist in part of its aims, such as protection and support of families or elderly.

⁷ Center-right liberal and slightly eurosceptic party.

⁸ „Za ľudí“ is a new (centrist and slightly conservative) political party founded by the former president Andrej Kiska after the end of his term, which was running for the Slovak parliamentary elections in 2020.

pillars due to spatial constraints. The first pillar will focus on corruption, as the fight against it was an important topic during the pre-election campaign, as well as the priority of the winning party OĽANO. The call for a change of political landscape in Slovakia with an aim to get rid of a deep-rooted corruption associated with the rule of SMER was escalating significantly since the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018, leading to an avalanche of discoveries of corruption of the previous government. The second pillar will focus on green transformation of the Slovak economy and country, reflecting the current priorities of the EU, specifically the European Green Deal and its objectives.

Corruption has been and still is a significant issue in the Visegrad 4 region, one that has arguably been exacerbated in recent years. Namely, Poland and Hungary are currently being examined due to suspected violations of the EU's founding values (such as rule of law, democracy, independence of judiciary, or

freedom of expression), which led to triggering the Article 7 of TEU.⁹ It is noted that the situation even worsened in both countries by 2020¹⁰, calling a special attention to the emergency measures adopted in Hungary during coronavirus pandemic as potentially incompatible with liberal democracy and EU values.¹¹ With two out of four V4 countries being questioned about such an important issue, it is important to monitor the development in Slovakia under their new government as further backsliding could lead to further fragmentation of the EU.

For the past six years, Slovakia has been scoring 50 or 51 out of 100 points in the Corruption Perception Index published by Transparency International.¹² The same index indicates that the placement in regards to other examined countries has been deteriorating continuously since 2015, currently setting at the 59th position out of 180 countries around the world.¹³ According to a public survey¹⁴ published by Transparency International Slovakia, the

⁹ Treaty on European Union, Article 7. Retrieved at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M007>

¹⁰ European Parliament. (2020). Rule of law in Poland and Hungary has worsened. Press release. Retrieved at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200109IPR69907/rule-of-law-in-poland-and-hungary-has-worsened>

¹¹ European Parliament. (2020). Hungary's emergency measures: MEPs ask EU to impose sanctions and stop payments. Press release. Retrieved at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200512IPR78917/hungary-s-emergency->

[measures-meps-ask-eu-to-impose-sanctions-and-stop-payments](#)

¹² Transparency International (n.d.). Corruption Perception Index: Slovakia. Retrieved at:

<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/svk#details>

¹³ Transparency International (n.d.). Corruption Perception Index: Table. Retrieved at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/table>

¹⁴ Transparency International Slovakia (2020). Corruption among top problems in Slovakia. Retrieved at:

corruption is being perceived as an increasingly significant problem in the country over the past 15 years, placing it currently as the third-most serious issue behind the standard of living (1st place) and healthcare (2nd place). The environment, despite being lower on the chart, follows similar trajectory of increasing awareness. As a corollary to this, the Slovak judiciary system suffers from strong distrust of its citizens, thus necessitating ambitious reforms. This trend shows well in an evaluation published by the World Economy Forum, according to which Slovakia placed as 119th out of 137 evaluated countries in terms of independence of its judiciary “from influences of the government, individuals, or companies”.¹⁵

The second pillar of focus of this paper’s analysis is going to be the issue of decarbonisation in connection to the economic recovery of the country following COVID-19 and the wider green transformation of society. The recovery will need to take place across the EU, as its Member States’ economies suffered – and

still suffer – under the restrictions adopted during the coronavirus pandemic, and based on the 2008 financial crisis, the most efficient road to recovery is through green investment.¹⁶ Before the pandemic unfolded, the European Green Deal¹⁷ was adopted by the end of 2019 and set a series of policy initiatives in pursuit of making the EU climate neutral by 2050 to help tackle global climate change. The important steps to achieve this will be a decarbonisation of the energy system, phasing out of coal and other fossil fuel sources, and increasing renewable energy sources, while keeping the decarbonisation process “at the lowest possible cost.”¹⁸ As decarbonisation is expected to alter the labour market significantly by creating more high-level jobs demanding skilled and qualified labour while also causing loss of jobs in low-skilled and unqualified sectors (i.e. coal miners)¹⁹, countries with significant presence of the latter will need to manage a just transition. To assist with this, the European Commission has introduced The Coal Regions in Transition

<https://transparency.sk/sk/korupcia-je-pre-obcanov-top-problemom-slovenska/>

¹⁵ World Economic Forum (2018). Judicial independence. Executive Opinion Survey. Retrieved at: https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_EOS_Q144.pdf

¹⁶ Green, M. (2020). Green recovery can revive virus-hit economies and tackle climate change, study says. Reuters. Retrieved at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-economy/green-recovery-can-revive-virus-hit-economies-and-tackle-climate-change-study-says-idUSKBN22G2Z7>

¹⁷ European Commission. (2019). The European Green Deal. Retrieved at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1588580774040&uri=CELEX:52019DC0640>

¹⁸ Ibid, Article 2.1.2.

¹⁹ Alves Diaz, P. et al. (2018). EU coal regions: opportunities and challenges ahead. European Commission. Retrieved at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/eu-coal-regions-opportunities-and-challenges-ahead>

Initiative and a variety of EU funds and other tools²⁰ to help the EU coal regions with their green transformation. Slovakia is recognized to be among 7 member states which will be the most affected by it.²¹ In addition to this, the strict counter-measures adopted in Slovakia in 2020 to counter the COVID-19 pandemic caused the Slovak GDP to downfall by -5,2% in the first quarter of the year²², making it the fourth most affected country in the EU. The latest prognosis released by the Slovak Institute of Financial Policy in June 2020 expects the overall downfall of the country's GDP in this year to reach up to 9,8%.²³ It will be therefore interesting to examine whether this situation may make the decarbonisation process in Slovakia even harder in the upcoming months and years.

The government's plan for the upcoming four years reflects the variety of ambitions across different sectors which can be found in the parties' pre-election programmes. Taking a look at the two pillars of interest of this paper, fighting corruption and rule of law were the top priority of the [pre-election programme](#) of the winning party OĽANO²⁴, which was also reflected as the first point of the government plan. A high importance of the problem of corruption was also visible in the [pre-election programme](#) of the SaS party which mentioned it across various sectors addressed by the document.²⁵ ²⁶ Sme Rodina and Za ľudí highly prioritized different issues in their pre-election programmes and placed the areas of both anti-corruption measures and environmental protection lower on its priority list.²⁷ ²⁸ Similarly, in case of the latter, a section

²⁰ European Commission. (2018). EU coal regions: opportunities and challenges ahead: What is the EU doing to help? Retrieved at: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/eu-coal-regions-opportunities-and-challenges-ahead>

²¹ Ibid: Alves Diaz, P. et al. (2018), page 5.

²² Eurostat. (2020). GDP main aggregates and employment estimates for first quarter 2020. Retrieved at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995/521/10294996/2-09062020-AP-EN.pdf/8a68ea5e-5189-5b09-24de-ea057adeee15>

²³ Institute of financial policy. (2019). 52nd meeting of the Committee for Macroeconomic Forecasts. Retrieved at: <https://www.mfsr.sk/sk/financie/institut-financnej-politiky/ekonomicke-prognozy/makroekonomicke-prognozy/52-zasadnutie-vyboru-makroekonomicke-prognozy-jun-2020.html#collapse-336991593479691844>

²⁴ OĽANO (n.d.). 2020: Odvážne, úprimne, pre ľudí. Retrieved at:

https://www.obycajniludia.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OLANO_program_2020_FINAL_online.pdf

²⁵ Namely, national budget, drawing of the EU funds, the functioning of the state apparatus and offices, justice and internal security, defence, power engineering, healthcare, agriculture and environmental protection.

²⁶ Sloboda a Solidarita (n.d.). Instructions for a better Slovakia: 1144 specific solutions to make it worth work, do business and live in here. Page 125. Retrieved at: <https://www.sas.sk/detail/5496/nr-sr-2020/subory>

²⁷ Sme rodina (n.d.). Family assistance programme. Retrieved at: <https://hnutie-smerodina.sk/dokumenty/Final-Program-SME-RODINA-volebny-program.pdf>

²⁸ Za ľudí (2019). Primary program document of the party Za ľudí. Retrieved at: <https://za-ludi.sk/wp-content/themes/ak/assets/files/ZL-zakladny-programovy-dokument.pdf>

focused on environment can be found lower also in OLANO's and SaS programmes' priorities. Yet, the final 2020-2024 government plan is obviously more focused and conscious towards the topic of environmental protection than its predecessors, simply by considering the length and extent of the list of problems and proposed solutions.²⁹

Proposed anti-corruption measures and their feasibility

A strong emphasis can be found in the topic of anti-corruption measures, reflecting the priority of the leading government party with a support found in the other coalition parties' pre-election programmes in this area. The government plan promises to work on prevention and zero tolerance of corruption (with a key component of control over assets of public officials, but also their material responsibility³⁰, control of lobbying, transparency of tenders and regional governing units, or ensuring expertise and independence of control organs). As a measurable indicator of success in this area, the government intends to "achieve an improvement by 20 positions in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, compared to the

current one."³¹ Another such indicator is going to be an actual conviction of any defendant based on a new conception of the law on proving the origin of a property because, as the government plan explains, the current wording of this legislation led to zero convictions in such cases and allowed both conflicts of interest as well as illicit income to fester amongst public officials. A control over the public officials' property is planned to be depoliticized (a yearly overview of high-level public officials' gain of property should be recorded and made public) and a new control body is planned to be established with a role to overview the ethics, conflict of interests and property declarations of public officials.³² In this area, there has already been smaller steps made, as the government submitted a proposal to define new crime of accepting or providing a gift with a value over 100 eur to a public official, which was a step praised by a Slovak Foundation Zastavme korupciu ("Let's Stop Corruption").³³ Introduction of bigger measures, such as establishment of new bodies or databases, will take more time.

The government also plans to strengthen competences of the National audit office to

²⁹ The section concerning environmental protection in the 2020-2024 government programme is 7 pages long, the one [2016-2020 programme](#) is 2.5 pages long and [the 2012-2016 government programme](#) only dedicates environment less than 2 pages.

³⁰ By a closely unspecified mechanism to be introduced.

³¹ Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024

(2020). Page 3. Retrieved at: http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/Programove%20vyhlasenie_cele%20zmenie_2020-2024

³² Ibid, page 4.

³³ Zastavme korupciu (2020). 100 days of the new government: evaluation concerning the anti-corruption measures. Retrieved at: <https://zastavmekorupciu.sk/nezaradene/100-dni-vlady-hodnotenie-z-hladiska-boja-poti-korupcii/>

overview the efficacy of expenditure of public finances, while increasing transparency and expectations concerning appointment of the Office's leading positions. Competences of the Public procurement office should be increased as well. Another planned measure of the new government is an increase of transparency in filling positions of workers in the public offices by setting clear rules for it and by implementation of a long-term strategic plan of human resources in state services (this should be reflected by announcing the availability of such labour positions for several months before actually appointing new workers). To support this, the government will establish a state personal agency under the Government office. However, such ambition clashes with one of the first decisions of the new ruling OĽANO party, dating back to the beginning of June 2020, when it decided to replace all 72 heads of district offices without previous consultation with the coalition partners.³⁴

Additionally, the government plan also promised to operationalize the Whistleblower protection office. In its [evaluation](#) of the 100 days of the new government in the office, the

foundation "Zastavme korupciu" criticizes that this office is still not working, even though the only obstacle is an appointment of a new head of this institution, and there have been sufficient time to do so and suitable candidates to appoint. However, the process of electing one has been wrought with indecision and apathy, leading to stagnation of the process.³⁵

In the area of the rule of law, introduction of various measures to increase transparency and effectiveness of judiciary is planned, among them a reform of the Judicial Council, as well as of the Constitutional Court, verification of assets of judges and their closest relatives³⁶, or establishment of a new body, a Supreme Administrative Court.³⁷ In the beginning of July 2020, the new Minister of justice, Mária Kolíková, already presented a proposal for a reform constitutional law where one of the points is the establishment of the aforementioned Supreme Administrative Court (SAC). The SAC will have the same position in the hierarchy of Slovak courts as the Slovak Supreme Court (SC), making it one of two highest-positioned bodies in the system. These courts will split the area of operation, making SAC responsible

³⁴ Hospodárske noviny (2020). Matovič: Výmena všetkých 72 prednostov okresných úradov je očistenie štátnej správy. Retrieved at: <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2159566-matovic-vymena-vsetkych-72-prednostov-okresnych-uradov-je-ocistenie-statnej-spravy>

³⁵ Zastavme korupciu (2020). 100 days of the new government: evaluation concerning the anti-corruption measures. Retrieved at: <https://zastavmekorupciu.sk/nezaradene/100-dni-vlady-hodnotenie-z-hladiska-boja-poti-korupcii/>

[dni-vlady-hodnotenie-z-hladiska-boja-poti-korupcii/](#)

³⁶ Recently, several corruption cases have been discovered in the Slovak justice system.

³⁷ Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024 (2020). Page 8. Retrieved at: <http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/Programove-vyhlasenie-2020-2024>

administrative justice and the SC for civil, commercial and criminal matters. Moreover, the role of SAC will also be to serve as a disciplinary court for judges (and other law-related professions) and also take over decisions in some areas of competency of the Slovak Constitutional Court (presidential, parliamentary, local authorities and European Parliament elections), in order to lower its high workload. Kolíková plans to establish the SAC by 1st of January 2021, starting its functioning by 1st of July 2021, using the half-year period for a transparent selection procedure for the positions of judges and their screening.³⁸ While awaiting its establishment, the Slovak police seemingly started to deal with corruption cases (bribery cases, influencing court decisions, decision-making based on external influence) among judges during action "Búrka" ("storm") in March 2020, when 13 judges suspected of corruption and interference in the independence of judiciary were arrested.³⁹

The solutions proposed in the government plan in the area of justice are appreciated by organization Via Iuris, stating that if these are "realised well, they will truly contribute to the increase of confidence in judiciary as well as other institutions which are important for the rule of law."⁴⁰ Moreover, the government promised to increase transparency of appointment process at the General Prosecution Office, also opening it to a wider spectrum of potential candidates. The foundation "Zastavme korupciu" appreciated an introduction of public hearing and appointment of a new General prosecutor as a way to increase transparency of the process, but it warns before some of changes introduced in the new legislation proposal.⁴¹ This proposal⁴² newly opens the position for non-previous prosecutors. This step stirred a debate among Slovak experts in this area and attracted also attention of the media and general public, as one of the names of potential candidates mentioned is a person with a significant political history, Daniel Lipšic.⁴³

³⁸ Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic (2020). One step closer to the reform changes in judiciary. Retrieved at: <https://www.justice.gov.sk/Stranky/aktualitade?cil.aspx?announcementID=2884>

³⁹ SME (2020). Polícia zadržala 13 sudcov z Kočnerových káuz, zásah nemá obdobu (minúta po minúte). Retrieved at: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22355354/kocner-a-sudcovia-zasah-naka-online.html>

⁴⁰ Via Iuris (2020). Program statement of the government contains a lot of important and ambitious aims. Retrieved at: <https://viaiuris.sk/aktuality/programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-obsahuje-vela-dolezitych-a-ambicioznych-cielov/>

⁴¹ Zastavme korupciu (2020). 100 days of the new government: evaluation concerning the anti-corruption measures. Retrieved at: <https://zastavmekorupciu.sk/nezaradene/100-dni-vlady-hodnotenie-z-hladiska-boja-poti-korupcii/>

⁴² Legislation change proposal (2020). Retrieved at: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=478826>

⁴³ Daniel Lipšic is by education and current occupation a lawyer, but he has been previously active in Slovak politics for a long time. Apart from being a former member of the Slovak Parliament, he also held a position of the Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice. Lipšic decided to resign from his position in the Parliament and

Such nomination could easily undermine the effort for depoliticization of the Slovak judiciary, irrespective of the fact that the person discussed is a reputable expert in his current duty.

Green transformation and decarbonisation of the Slovak economy in the context of economic recovery

The government plan also quite extensively covers the topic of green national policies and protection of the environment. As this issue has finally started to gain traction both at national and EU level across Europe, it is promising to see that Slovakia is becoming the trailblazer of the normally recalcitrant V4 countries, although it remains to be seen if the rhetoric will be matched by ambitious actions, particularly during and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The presented government plan names an intention to contribute to multilateral efforts to protect environment and mitigate effects of climate change, highlights the importance of sustainable development and cautious use of

natural resources, and underlines Slovak commitment to the Paris climate agreement and Agenda 2030. This is supposedly going to be fulfilled by the implementation of an existing document, the Vision and Strategy of Development of the Slovak Republic for 2030 ("Slovakia 2030") which was prepared by the previous government and is currently awaiting final adoption by the new one. The government also commits itself to be an active participant in terms of creating, participating and executing environmental and climate policies of the EU.⁴⁴ It also recognizes the European Green Deal as a great opportunity for modernization of the country and intends to draw more effectively from European funds in order to lower inequality among Slovak regions, enhance development of the country, all while cautiously protecting the environment.⁴⁵

Concerning the compatibility of decarbonisation of the Slovak economy with the country's post-pandemic recovery, the government plan claims to perceive the crisis caused by COVID-19 as "a breakthrough point in our previous position concerning the state's responsibility in terms of protection of health and

leave the political party he was at the time a member of and return to his work as a lawyer after taking part in a car accident in 2016 which resulted in death of a pedestrian.

⁴⁴ This vision does not have a concrete plan, it only consists out of several more general aims. One of those is a willingness of the government to work on and develop regional and bilateral cooperation in environmental area. The former may be interesting in terms of Slovakia potentially inspiring other V4 countries in fulfilling common

objectives, such as those settled in the European Green Deal. Anyways, this remains to be seen in the upcoming years, as no further information is given in this regards by the government plan.

⁴⁵ Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024 (2020). Responsible protection of environment, p.92-98. Retrieved at: http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/Programove%20vyhlasenie_cele%20zmenie_2020-2024

life of its citizens”, which provides Slovakia with “a chance to learn a lesson and start to build greener economy which will be more resistant to climate change.”⁴⁶ This statement indicates that the government intends to pursue its original objectives, which seems not to be weakened, but even strengthened by the crisis, although the lack of concrete timeline warrants vigilance from both the domestic and international community in order to ensure that the ambitious rhetoric is matched by equally ambitious policies.

Further developing the idea of decarbonisation, the new Slovak government promises to review the Low-carbon strategy (which is already currently happening in case of this strategy) and the National integrated energy and climate plan, as well as to adopt a new legislation – a dedicated climate law – aimed at tackling climate change and support decentralization and deregulation of the energy sector.⁴⁷ The government also makes a commitment for a transition to carbon neutral economy by 2050⁴⁸, reflecting the objectives set in the European Green Deal. With a longevity of a Slovak government for 4 years, it is crucial for these efforts to continue in case of change of rule in 2024. Some of the strategies mentioned in this document were already prepared by the previous government, which should ensure at least some level of bipartisan support across the political

divides. The new government plan is also – on paper – quite ambitious in regards of green policies and decarbonisation of Slovak economy, but the reforms that need to be put in place will have to be continuous in the upcoming years, considering the deadlines in 2030 and 2050; it cannot remain purely on rhetorical level. It is now up to the new government to make a good use of the opportunity set by the European Green Deal and set a pace for upcoming decades, while it is needed to be more active in this area than the previous governments, which were mostly suspending green policies and solutions and only implementing climate-friendly policies when absolutely forced to.⁴⁹

Important remaining questions are: Will Slovakia actually achieve carbon neutrality until a given deadline, or is it just a likable rhetoric designed to obfuscate? What is going to substitute the energy production? Is the decarbonisation on track to be achieved? And how is Slovakia going to deal with the just transition for its coal regions?

Reacting to the new government’s programme, the Slovak Greenpeace office suggested that decarbonisation should form a basis of the expected new law about climate change and make its primary aim an achievement of carbon neutrality already by

⁴⁶ Ibid, page 92.

⁴⁷ Ibid, page 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid, page 94.

⁴⁹ Hojsík, M. (2019). European Green Deal is not enough. Decarbonisation of Slovak

economy, p.16. Euractiv. Retrieved at: <https://sk.euractiv.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/special-report/EA-SPECIAL-122019-Dekarboniza%CC%81cia-slovenskej-ekonomiky-2019.pdf>

2040. It also recommends the government to establish a new office, formed by experts, NGOs and representatives of the government, which should be helping achieving this goal.⁵⁰ Such aim may seem too ambitious in comparison to the final government plan, but the same deadline was perceived as manageable for OLANO in its pre-election programme, which was also proposing measures to achieve this goal, such as protection of forests, plantation of trees, limiting carbon dioxide production, introduction of carbon tax and support for electromobility.⁵¹ According to energy analyst Michal Šnobl, there will be some countries struggling with achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, namely Poland and potentially also Czech Republic, but Slovakia is perceived as one that can realistically manage this goal, especially if operationalizing the remaining two nuclear blocks in Mochovce, which are nearing completion and testing. He also points out that use of gas is a good temporary tool to help coal-oriented economies to approach carbon neutrality until better renewable energy sources, i.e. wind and solar, can be produced at an adequate scale.⁵²

The Vision "Slovakia 2030"⁵³, which was mentioned in the government plan as a strategy it will follow, aims to decarbonise the Slovak economy by its transformation to an innovation-oriented economy, evaluation of internal resources and potentials of regions, and strengthening the environmental and social sustainability of the economy. The Vision states an aim to eliminate coal fuels from Slovakia's energy mix and suppress domestic coal mining and power generation from coal by 2023, as well as terminate investment of public resources into development and maintenance of coal mining infrastructure.⁵⁴ To help this transfer, technological innovations to help energy efficiency and development of low carbon economy should be introduced.⁵⁵ More clarity which would define specific ways to actually achieve the changes outlined is missing in this document. The need to eliminate coal from Slovak energy mix is not followed by a definition of what will replace it and the call for further innovations and investment in research is not followed by numbers and types of innovations which are perceived to be helpful and how to achieve them or where to get them from. While the acknowledgement is valid, until concrete

⁵⁰ Teraz.sk (2020). Greenpeace: carbon neutrality should be the basis of the law about climate change. TASR. Retrieved at: <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/greenpeace-uhlikova-neutralita-by-maj/465974-clanok.html>

⁵¹ OLANO (n.d.). 2020: Odvážne, úprimne, pre ľudí. Article 57, page 113.

⁵² Teraz.sk (2020). Analyst: Some of the EU countries will not be able to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. TASR. Retrieved at:

<https://www.teraz.sk/ekonomika/analytik-niektore-krajiny-eu-nebudu/479906-clanok.html>

⁵³ Vision and strategy of development of the Slovak republic for 2030 (2019). Retrieved at: <https://www.enviroportal.sk/eia/dokument/292512?uid=dd070f8fd069043412af11fe7ed03027730c695b>

⁵⁴ Ibid, page 35, point 130.

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 35, point 132.

proposals and plans are formulated it runs the traditional risk of relying on undefined technological innovations rather than relying on existing and readily available solutions, which is of course a point of criticism in and of itself. Since the beginning of the rule of the new government, these shortcomings of the Vision were not addressed and concretized and the government plan does not comment on any planned revisit of the document.

The aforementioned [National integrated energy and climate plan](#) develops some information concerning energy mix and production further than the Vision "Slovakia 2030". Concerning the pillar of focus of this paper, an optimal energy mix, support for use of renewable resources to produce energy, as well as use of nuclear energy as a low-carbon energy source, are named as ways to decarbonise Slovak economy.⁵⁶ However, instead of developing the idea of renewable resources which should be used, for example by concretizing their type, range of use or placement, the document rather focuses on nuclear energy and innovations, which, if new ones have to be build, will be both too financially and environmentally unsustainable compared to other renewable alternatives. The document also states that the transition to low-carbon economy in Slovakia is connected to increased costs which "will be paid by consumers and tax payers" which

is a reason why the measures adopted will need to be energetically effective (making renewable sources of energy only one of the tools to achieve this, not the exclusive one), alongside financial support of various mechanism in 2021-2030 (such as Modernization fund and Innovation fund).⁵⁷ Three of the most useful ways to decarbonize Slovak economy are named as: 1) replacing coal by a low-carbon sources of energy; 2) measures increasing energy efficiency; 3) decarbonisation of transport. The alternative sources of energy, which are defined in the document, should be renewable sources of energy, nuclear energy, decarbonised gases, while underlining the importance of innovative technologies (without further specification of these technologies) to help use the energy sources effectively. This can be supported by use of waste gases and waste from circular economy. Nuclear energy is highlighted as having an important role in decarbonisation of Slovak economy, pointing out its minimal impact on final prices of energy. By 2030, an increasing trend in use of natural gas is expected, which should be then replaced by biomass, wind and solar energy. The option of the use of biomass is, however, criticized as one which would have bad influence on air quality as well as not be truly renewable. The trend of coal mining is already being lowered by pre-existing policies and its use post-2023 will depend on its economic rentability after the state

⁵⁶ Ministry of economy (2019). National integrated energy and climate plan for 2021-2030, p. 10. Retrieved at:

<https://www.economy.gov.sk/uploads/files/ljkP/MQAc.pdf>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

subsidies are stopped.⁵⁸ The two aforementioned documents are seemingly providing the new Slovak government with a good starting point, as some analyses and scenarios have been already worked on. After the government finishes the evaluation of these strategies, as promised in its programme, it should be able to relatively quickly work on beginning the arduous journey of decarbonizing Slovakia to fulfil its obligations.

Concerning the labour affected by decarbonisation of Slovak economy, the government plan is specifically aiming to end the energy production from coal in the power plant Nováky by 2023 the latest and to integrate its employees back to labour market.⁵⁹ Any further precision of what labour positions these workers will be re-educated and directed to, how this reintegration will be happening, what the transition cost will be and how the financial side will be covered, is lacking in the government plan. However, experts claim that the coal power plants Nováky and Vojany, which are already counting with having to lower their orientation on coal over time, even have a potential to become a regional role model in terms of transformation

to a greener economy. This should take place by replacing coal by other sources of energy from other regions and concerning the source of heat, waste produced in Slovakia, which cannot be further reused or recycled, should be used for this region. Moreover, the national strategy for this region should be cautious not to switch simply to the automobile industry, which is already strong in the country but also environmentally unfriendly due to its dependence on fossil fuels (unless a transformation of this industry to electro mobiles would take place), but to make use and develop particular regional potential.⁶⁰

The government programme further promises to support renewable sources of energy and delegates the Ministry of environment to come up with a proposal for cancellation of subsidies for fossil fuels (including exemptions), as well as with a plan for a transition to circular economy (including raising a degree of energy recovery of waste generated in Slovakia).⁶¹ Again, the government plan does not specify what will be the primary source(s) of energy that will replace the carbon-intensive energy production, which makes it harder to develop

⁵⁸ Ibid, page 33.

⁵⁹ Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024 (2020). Responsible protection of environment, p.95. Retrieved at:

<http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/Programove%20vyhlaseenie%20cele%20zmenie%202020-2024>

⁶⁰ Szalai, P. (2019). Nováky and Vojany directed from coal towards waste incineration. Euractiv. Accessed at: <https://sk.euractiv.eu/wp->

[content/uploads/sites/8/special-report/EA-SPECIAL-122019-Dekarboniza%CC%81cia-slovenskej-ekonomiky-2019.pdf](http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/SPECIAL-122019-Dekarboniza%CC%81cia-slovenskej-ekonomiky-2019.pdf)

⁶¹ Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the period 2020-2024 (2020). Responsible protection of environment, p. 96. Retrieved at:

<http://www.culture.gov.sk/extdoc/8541/Programove%20vyhlaseenie%20cele%20zmenie%202020-2024>

clear expectations for its implementation. Further criticism comes from the Slovak Climate Initiative which criticizes that the government plan does not reflect any proposals concerning decarbonisation of other energetically demanding sectors, such as steel or chemical one.⁶²

Greenpeace Slovakia also considers the government plan to be deficient, due to it being a likable vision of the future steps in countering climate change, but missing sufficiently tangible and practical solutions and aims to be achieved in the upcoming four years. According to Greenpeace, the clarity of the intention is important as the issue of climate change is necessary to be handled as soon as possible, already in the new period of governance, but the announced measures are inadequate from a practical standpoint.⁶³ This sentiment is not unfounded; Slovakia, as well as the rest of the V4, missed a golden opportunity throughout the 2010's to transform ahead of the curve and reap extensive benefits from being a first-mover.

Achieving the required ambition will be a Sisyphean task, albeit one that nonetheless has to be undertaken, thus making the new government's acknowledgement of it laudable.

During the first 100 days of the new Minister of Environment, Ján Budaj, his activities were aimed towards areas different from decarbonisation of Slovak economy, such as protection of biodiversity, waste management or anti-corruption measures. However, in terms of post-pandemic situation in the EU, Budaj joined an appeal of 19 ministers of environment of the EU member states for a green recovery. He has done so as the only one of his colleagues from the V4 countries, marking Slovakia as a leader in these efforts in the region.⁶⁴ During an online Council meeting with other environmental ministers on 23rd June, Budaj commented that "Slovakia supports carbon neutrality and we are currently preparing a termination of coal mining, as it is a source of significant pollution."⁶⁵ It can be thus expected that decarbonisation is going to be approached shortly, but preparation for

⁶² Hajko, J. et al. (2020). Analýza Programového vyhlásenia vlády Slovenskej republiky na obdobie rokov 2020 – 2024 z pohľadu energetických a klimatických tém. Slovak Climate Initiative & Slovak Foreign Policy Association. Retrieved at: https://klimatickainiciativa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Analýza-program-vyhlásenia-vlady-SR_2020.pdf

⁶³ Greenpeace Slovakia (2020). Specific aims for protection of climate are missing in the government program statement. Press release. Retrieved at: [https://www.greenpeace.sk/tlacova-](https://www.greenpeace.sk/tlacova-sprava/1526/programovemu-vyhlaseniu-vlady-chybaju-konkretne-ciele-na-ochranu-klimy/)

[sprava/1526/programovemu-vyhlaseniu-vlady-chybaju-konkretne-ciele-na-ochranu-klimy/](https://www.minzp.sk/spravy/100-dni-ministra-jana-budaja-restart-ministerstva-zivotneho-prostredia-sr.html)

⁶⁴ Slovak Ministry of Environment (2020). 100 days of the Minister Ján Budaj and a restart of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic. Press release. Retrieved at: <https://www.minzp.sk/spravy/100-dni-ministra-jana-budaja-restart-ministerstva-zivotneho-prostredia-sr.html>

⁶⁵ Slovak Ministry of Environment (2020). Minister Budaj supports European green recovery. Press release. Retrieved at: <https://www.minzp.sk/spravy/minister-budaj-podporuje-zelenu-obnovu-europy.html>

such extensive measures (including review of the two above mentioned strategies) takes more time than the Minister has had so far.

The green restart of economy outlined by the government, is also supported by a group of Slovak environmental organizations and initiatives, which pushed this by an open letter to the new government, listing a variety of concrete measures to help such process, including an urge for the transformation of carbon regions.⁶⁶ However, it remains to be seen whether the government will actively consult these organizations and experts and incorporate their policy advice.

Further remarks

The current government has a significant majority in the new Slovak parliament by taking up [95 out of 150 seats](#).⁶⁷ This gives the new governmental coalition a strong position, as with a majority of over three fifths of the parliament, it can adopt more significant changes in the country's legal framework, including changes in the Constitution.⁶⁸ Therefore, concerning the constellation of the newly appointed Slovak Parliament, the current government coalition should be able to adopt reformative measures in terms of anti-corruption action, economic

recovery and decarbonisation, as well as other areas of its interest, without any greater problems. This also heightens the chances that the measures implemented in the next four years will be politically long-lived, as the government has the adequate majority to embed these reforms more deeply than if it had faced a stronger opposition. The current opposition should not be an obstacle to the efforts or reaching decarbonisation of Slovak economy within a given deadline, even if not being particularly active in this area during previous rule, as it is not vehemently opposed to this, which can only be supported by the fact that the efforts in this area are EU-wide and Slovakia promised to take part.

On the other hand, numerous measures from the government plan are formulated in a way that the government "will consider" or "will review" some policies, regulations, institutions, or areas. This is a cause for concern as the ambiguity and lack of tangible commitment might be indicative of an unwillingness to engage in the ambitious yet challenging reforms needed to transforming the plan into reality.

⁶⁶ Priatel'ia Zeme – CEPA (2020). Open letter for the Slovak government. Retrieved at: http://cepa.priateliazeme.sk/images/pdf/List_M_VO_vlade.pdf

⁶⁷ National Council of the Slovak Republic. List of members according to the parties. Retrieved at:

https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=poslaneci/zoznam_abc&ListType=1&CisObdobia=8

⁶⁸ Government office (n.d.). Constitution of the Slovak Republic. Chapter 5, Article 84. Retrieved at: <https://archiv.vlada.gov.sk/old.uv/8581/piata-hlava.html>

Conclusion

The Slovak parliamentary elections confirmed the end to the long-term rule of SMER, enabling the new government a chance to deal with a deep-rooted corruption and begin the development of a more environmentally conscious – and hopefully more prosperous – country. At the same time, the new government finds itself in a good position to actually push these changes in terms of legislation, due to its representation in the parliament.

Despite the new government plan having clear shortcomings, such as ambiguity of a part of its aims or unspecified mechanisms to achieve them, it is generally ambitious and quite complex document in the area of anti-corruption measures. The section on environmental protection reflects the international commitments of the country in this area, recognizing the European Green Deal as an opportunity for Slovakia, including transition to carbon neutral economy, although the ambitious rhetoric is not matched with adequate clarity on how such a transition can be managed in practice. The good ideas will need to be supported by specifying the measures, solutions, tools and deadlines, which can be expected to get introduced in the upcoming four years. Based on the announced willingness of the new Slovak government to take the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to start a green economic recovery and on the recommendations provided by experts, it is clear that decarbonisation of

Slovak economy will be challenging but should not be an obstacle, but one of the ways to achieve successful post-pandemic green recovery of the EU.

The newly formulated objectives of the Slovak government can also serve as an inspiration for its partners in the Visegrad 4. With the backsliding of democracy and rule of law visible in Poland and Hungary, such an example is welcome opportunity to create a trend countering such developments, leading towards a more unified and prosperous European Union with a constructive partner in the V4. In terms of commitment to European green policies, common goals and decarbonisation of its economy, Slovakia, as a country with significant coal tradition, also has a potential to be a good example for the rest of the V4 in the area of decarbonisation, if it fulfils its promises in its new ambitious government plan and the recently formulated interest in green post-pandemic recovery.



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