

# Opinion: Warning signal for Europe from Slovakia

After Jan Kuciak's assassination, hundreds of thousands of Slovaks have demonstrated against corruption and abuse of power. Keno Verseck believes that foreign countries should pay close attention.



The murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé, Martina Kusnirova, shocked Slovakia like no other event since the country's independence 25 years ago. But the sentiment of shock and deep grief is now increasingly becoming mixed with outrage. Friday saw the biggest demonstrations in the country since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. One hundred thousand people took to the streets nationwide, with an estimated 50,000 people in Bratislava alone — a very large number for a country of 5 million people.

The motto at the rallies was "Let's stand up for a fair Slovakia." People in the country are taking to the streets to demonstrate against corruption and abuse of power. They are demanding that the rule of law apply across the board and want more transparency and more responsible government leaders. The current demonstrations are the biggest yet, but they are far from being the first. Protests have been flaring up periodically for years against Robert Fico's government and his so-called Social Democratic Party (SMER-SD). Investigative journalists

continue to uncover unbelievable corruption among SMER members and other government politicians, without the scandals ever having had political or legal consequences.

## **High price of success**



Keno Verseck reports regularly from

central and southeastern Europe

A widespread and deep dissatisfaction is behind the current protests. In particular, people are unhappy with the way the transition from the real socialist dictatorship to democracy and a market economy has been made. It is true that, from a macroeconomic point of view, Slovakia is now rightly regarded as a successful country in the eastern part of the European Union. But it has paid a high price for this success. Hundreds of thousands of people became the social losers of years of hard economic reform policies after the end of the dictatorship. There may have been a greater acceptance of this if Slovakia's citizens hadn't had to witness a small elite, whose members had often already been among the winners under the dictatorship, shamelessly lining their pockets with the former national wealth in a highly criminal manner.

This kind of self-dealing by the elite continues to this day, but the powerful are now paying attention to the appearance of legality through legal tricks or by passing laws with sufficiently large loopholes. Nonetheless, it remains thoroughly immoral. Fico and his party have been hiding all this behind half left-wing populist and half right-wing nationalist rhetoric.

## **No strong political alternative**

As large and justified as the Slovak citizens' dissatisfaction may be, the citizen movements have not managed to become a political force. There is currently no strong political alternative that credibly advocates for the rule of law, more social justice and better democracy. Some of the opposition parties have been

discredited since their former reign. Currently, right-wing populists and right-wing extremists are the main alternatives.

This development in Slovakia is similar to that of most other central and southeastern EU countries. Many observers in Slovakia now fear that, over the long term, their country could move towards a political situation similar to that in Hungary or Poland.

The public outside Slovakia and European politicians are not yet sufficiently aware of the background behind the Kuciak murder case and its possible political implications. What is now happening in Slovakia should be a warning signal — a reason to look very carefully at current developments in Slovakia, and to support the civil democracy movement.

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