

Slovakia's cabinet

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In May 2023, President Čaputová appointed the country's first cabinet composed largely of non-partisan experts. The cabinet has often been labelled 'non-political' or 'technocratic' – but **Max Steuer** questions this. He argues that while Slovakia's cabinet may not be formed of party politicians, it is politically and democratically legitimate

Governing in disarray

In 2023, if we were to identify a prominent candidate for swift illiberalisation à la Hungary under Orbán or Poland under Kaczyński, Slovakia would rank highly on the list.

After a series of intra-coalition disagreements, in December 2022, the cabinet of Eduard Heger, the prime minister, failed a confidence vote in parliament. President Zuzana Čaputová exercised her powers to grant a temporary mandate, until the early elections, for a cabinet without parliamentary majority support. The elections, however, will not take place until September – and this has sparked widespread public dissatisfaction.

Moreover, the cabinet stands accused of major failures. Its shortcomings cover implementation of key political reforms, the use of EU funds to boost the economy, and public justifications of its decisions.

All this has created a political climate in which illiberal sentiments thrive. Disinformation runs rampant, and Slovakia's education system still largely fails to produce critically-minded citizens.

The new Slovak cabinet: crash course in genius?

Heger's cabinet was supposed to continue until the September elections. But, for various reasons, ministers kept resigning. Ultimately, Heger gave up and succumbed to pressure, submitting his resignation to the president. This obliged the head of state to appoint a new prime minister.

The new cabinet, according to the Slovak Constitution, must request a confidence vote in parliament within 30 days after the presidential appointment. If it fails, Čaputová might reappoint it with curtailed competences. However, until the confidence vote, the 'presidential' cabinet exercises the full scale of its constitutional competences.

The president appointed a cabinet of non-partisan experts, led by economist Ľudovít Ódor. Can this expertise lift Slovakia out of its governing malaise?

The president opted to appoint Ľudovít Ódor, Vice Governor of the National Bank, as prime minister. Ódor is also a prominent economist who has contributed to several key Slovakian economic reforms over the past twenty years. Ódor's most recent book is the 600+ page Crash Course in Genius. Indeed, some believe that only a genius would be capable of lifting Slovakia out of its current malaise.

The rest of the cabinet, too, consists largely of recognised non-partisan experts who have little time to get to grips with complex political portfolios. The cabinet manifesto is still being drafted. But key cabinet commitments undoubtedly include the implementation of free and fair elections in September, and drafting the next state budget.

A democratically legitimate cabinet

The appointment of Ódor's cabinet sparked a debate on democracy versus technocracy. Several international outlets presented Slovakia's new cabinet as a 'caretaker', non-political one. The claim that the cabinet is, at heart, technocratic casts doubt on its legitimacy. Observers might also perceive the cabinet's mandate as being limited in time (it is expected to govern for only around five months), and in the range of actions it proposes.

It is true that most of Ódor's cabinet members are not associated with a political party. But there are some major potential pitfalls in presenting the cabinet as merely technocratic or non-political.

First, as a former president of the Constitutional Court of Slovakia pointed out, this ignores the wording of the constitutional text. Consequently, it questions the authority of the Slovak Constitution itself. The Constitution does not distinguish between the legitimacy of cabinets composed of representatives of political parties, or the president's non-partisan appointees. Hence, until it fails to win a confidence vote, Ódor's cabinet has the same constitutional status as one appointed in the aftermath of general elections.

Ódor's cabinet has the same constitutional status as one appointed in the aftermath of general elections, and enjoys the backing of a directly elected president

Of course, this cabinet is expected to lose the confidence vote. In this case, the president may reinstate it with curtailed competences. But the president's central role is another reason why labelling the cabinet 'non-political' is misleading.

Although Slovakia is a parliamentary system, it has a directly elected head of state. As a result, some think of Slovakia as a semi-presidential system. Directly elected presidents enjoy democratic legitimacy. Ódor's cabinet has the backing of a directly elected president. In addition, President Čaputová enjoys considerable public support. She remains consistently at or close to the top of public opinion polls for the most trusted Slovak political leader.

The importance of language

The fact that Ódor's cabinet has a strong claim to democratic legitimacy does not make governing easier for it. Notably, it lacks the backing of a parliamentary majority. As a result, it will struggle to effectively implement reforms which require cooperation from the legislature.

However, describing the cabinet as 'technocratic' or 'non-political' needlessly undermines its standing. As social scientists we should avoid such labels if we cannot properly define them. Might we struggle to explain these conceptual discussions to a broader audience beyond academe? If so, we should avoid altogether terms such as 'technocratic' and 'non-political' when speaking to the broader public.

Competence is not antithetical to politics

After the first major public debate featuring Ódor as prime minister, several viewers bemoaned the fact that his cabinet is expected to be in place for such a short term. They wished that it could last longer. Yet their initial enthusiasm might wane, especially if the legislature fails to cooperate, or if a no-confidence vote limits the cabinet's de facto powers.

Even then, however, five months is long enough to show that competence and political decision-making can go hand in hand. It may even increase the importance Slovak citizens attach to competence when they go to the polls at the end of September.

If we want Slovak citizens to recognise that politics and competence can have a positive relationship, the first step is to avoid presenting the current cabinet as non-political

Debates on the meaning of technocracy, its relationship to politics, the conditions under which it is political, as well as its impact on democracy are undoubtedly important. But the public rarely engages thoroughly with such concepts. The first step to recognising that politics and competence may have a positive relationship, therefore, is to avoid presenting Slovakia's current cabinet as non-political.

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