

Review

Marek Rybář – Peter Spáč – Petr Voda: The 2014 Presidential Elections in Slovakia

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It has become an established practice to publish analytical study on all elections in Slovakia, particularly parliamentary and presidential, and occasionally communal, regional or European elections. The custom dates back to 1994 when the first publication edited by Soňa Szomolányi and Grigorij Mesežnikov, brought together fifteen contributors across disciplines and institutions. The Institute for Public Affairs (IPA), an independent non-governmental think tank, continued the tradition and published electoral series for years, until 2010. In 2012 it was the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Science to take over the relay. The publications on elections advance and promote specialist reflection, but equally raise the standard and worth of the subdiscipline of electoral studies. At the same time, they build the memory of the relatively new Slovak democracy.

The authors Marek Rybář, Peter Spáč and Petr Voda grasped the opportunity to cover the 2014 presidential elections. Their monograph was published by Czech publisher, the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Culture in the Political Science Series. Far before the year passed since the elections, the publication was out for the specialist and lay public as a helpful and practical electoral book.

The monograph is based in two firm pillars. First, the analysis from the perspective of political science focuses on the role of presidency in the Slovak political system in general. It examines the elections in terms of candidate recruitment, their party background and political consequences of electoral outcome. Second, based on the available surveys and electoral data the study analyses voter behaviour. The authors have fully applied their expertise and extensive research and publication experience. Their account of the electoral campaign and political communication on the part of the candidates comes across as less analytical and more descriptive. Yet they did not aim to approach this particular topic in further depth.

The 2014 presidential elections were the fourth among the direct elections in Slovakia, but brought a number of premières. It was for the first time ever that the incumbent Prime Minister ran for the post. These elections were also the first when a non-partisan candidate – and political novice – won the contest. Similarly to all other nationwide voting, the 2014 presidential elections presented an authentic picture on societal atmosphere in Slovakia. The message

strongly conveyed information about public disenchantment with political parties and a desire for new, non-partisan and authentic leaders. The inability of centre-right parties to offer a credible candidate has fully unveiled the crisis on this side of the political spectrum. The elections have further shown that, when tit-for-tat is the practice, polarisation in Slovak society becomes fully apparent. The competition for presidency brought along additional follow ups, most markedly the emergence of a new, relatively strong centre-right party named The Network (Siet').

The monograph is comprehensively and logically structured. The first chapter addresses the status of presidency within the political system, and analyses formal and informal powers, as well as the authority of the president and presidency within the society. The second chapter details the formal aspects of candidacy and concrete candidates in the 2014 elections. The third chapter offers additional information about electoral campaign or rather the messages and positions of individual candidates. It further examines the campaign of the first-round winners prior to the second round.

The chapter that focuses on electoral forecasts deserves particular commendation. Electoral forecasts represent quite an important aspect of any campaign. Yet they receive very little attention which they otherwise merit. The only exception is criticism coming from somewhat inexperienced journalists or unsuccessful contestants. The situation in political polls in Slovakia is indeed extraordinary. The critical reflection on the issue could have gone farther than what the authors opted for. It is a reason for concern that only two out of the four agencies that are the key providers of data for the media and public in Slovakia have a website, and only one (FOCUS) is member of professional body that warrants quality standards (the Slovak Association of Research Agencies / Slovenská asociácia výskumných agentúr, SAVA). As the authors point out, "Present situation can be objectively deemed decidedly negative. It is even incongruous given the nature of business in which these agencies engage." (p. 82) I do agree about the absurdity, but would add that the situation is actually critical. Imagine FOCUS giving up political polls: who would set the professional benchmark? In this respect, even in comparison with the Czech Republic, Slovakia resembles "banana republic". In addition to a number of private commercial agencies in the Czech Republic, there is also the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM). It is a successor to the former publicly funded Public Opinion Research Institute under the Czech Statistical Office. The Centre is a research department within the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Incorporation of data collection into an academic institution secures its expertise and credibility. A question arises about what has ever happened with the Slovak Public Opinion Research Institute under the Slovak Statistics Office.

The chapter on electoral polls deserves two additional observations. In terms of common terminology (pp. 89–90), some time ago SAVA stipulated that the term preferences is calculated on the basis of decided voters, i.e. not only those who are decided to vote, but also know whom they would vote for. When it comes to term “party preferences”, the rule is essentially respected. Another observation concerns minimum standards for publishing information on data collection. What are the means of gathering information? Face-to-face and telephone interviews might differ, not to speak of online questionnaires. That might affect methodological artefacts. The authors have given methodical attention supported by monitoring to presentation of electoral polls in the media as well. In terms of the polls, particularly with respect to the media, I would raise an additional word of caution about exclusive focus on horse-race journalism without additional information. That, however, takes us back to the state of Slovak market with political polls. As long as public information is left exclusively to commercial agencies, surveys of phenomena beyond the scope of commercial interest – not in terms of finance, but of attention – can hardly be expected.

The analysis of voter behaviour is a value added that the monograph offers. The authors use electoral statistics that also cover previous presidential elections. They thus document essential comparisons in time and point out to a more permanent underpinning of political taste, for instance the link between the second rounds in Rudolf Schuster 1999 – Ivan Gašparovič 2004 (no doubt as a counterpoint to Vladimír Mečiar 2004) – Iveta Radičová 2009 – Andrej Kiska 2014. An additional value of the analysis is also the line drawn between the results of the 2014 presidential elections with the 2012 parliamentary ones. Noteworthy patterns arise in the distribution of political support and voter inclinations in elections and in time.

Based on surveys provided/conducted by FOCUS, the authors have methodically mapped all available socio-demographic characteristics of candidate supporters (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.). Another secondary source (IPA) provided data on arguments in support of the choice of finalists. Voter characteristics is effectively supported by electoral statistics and territorial support that is analysed according to the nature of individual districts in terms of economy, ethnicity, religiosity, size of settlement, economic activity, or electoral turnout. The analysis of voter shift between the first and the second round goes well under the obligatory surface. The authors used IPA data from post-elections polls. A few inaccuracies, however, should be noted. Image 1 (p. 167) does not also address the composition of non-voters. Drawing together responses “I did not participate” and “I don’t know”, as in Table 7 (p. 173), is inaccurate. “I don’t know” does not mean non-participation. Even though the percentage differences are marginal, a publication of such repute should best

avoid them. Finally, presenting rounded numbers as data provided with a single decimal number accuracy is also needless imprecision.

The final chapter discusses electoral participation in general and specifically in the 2014 presidential elections. The analysis proves, *inter alia*, the U-curve used to articulate the relationship between the size of municipality and voter mobilisation. In connection with the phenomenon and the explanation of the rise in electoral turnout from the first to the second round would have benefitted from further sociological thought. The authors also offer here an inspiring differentiation of age cohorts in political generations (pp. 184-185). Yet the explanation of the content of categories could have been offered earlier, as they already work with the concept when characterising voters by age. The much needed explanation that only comes in the closing chapter makes the selected categories illogical.

All told, the 2014 presidential elections in Slovakia receive in the eponymous publication a fine academic reflection. The authors have made utmost use of available sources – theoretical empirical and media. They offer wide range of readers a fine publication, “food for thought” and inspiration how to analyse elections and voting in the future.

Ol'ga Gyárfášová
Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University, Bratislava