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Slovakia: Political Crisis with Sputnik V in the Background

Slovakia has officially become the second EU country to approve the use of Sputnik V. According to the adopted plan, 2 million doses will be delivered to the country in the coming months. The decision was made by the prime minister, and the minister of health did not consult with the full government, which caused a serious political crisis within the government coalition. Indeed, the head of government's jocular statement for Radio Express led to a diplomatic crisis in relations with Ukraine.

Purchase of a vaccine and its political repercussions. Slovakia's prime minister Igor Matovič (OĽaNO) has decided to purchase 2 million Sputnik V vaccines from Russia. They are to be delivered by June of this year. The first batch of the Russian vaccine (200,000 units) was brought on a military plane on Monday, March 1, to Košice in eastern Slovakia. As Prime Minister Matovič shared at the press conference at the airport, the decision to buy the vaccine was made without waiting for the product to be registered by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) due to the dramatic pandemic situation in Slovakia. The Prime Minister did not have the consent of his government to order the Sputnik V vaccine. The order was formally placed by the Minister of Health, Marek Krajčí (OĽaNO).

Ivan Korčok (SaS), Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, criticized the purchase of the vaccine and the Prime Minister's press conference. In his opinion, the presence of Prime Minister Igor Matovič at the airport in Košice in order to symbolically collect the delivery of the first batch of Russian vaccine was unnecessary. He pointed out that it was not the origin of the product that mattered, but whether it was properly registered in the EU. Korčok also stated that the vaccine could be a tool of a hybrid war waged by Russia against EU countries.

Slovakia's President Zuzana Čaputová also expressed her dissatisfaction with the government's decision to allow the use of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine because the procedures necessary for EU to confirm its security were not followed. According to the president, the only sensible way out of the situation would be to ask the EMA to register the vaccine.

The coalition party SaS is demanding that the Sputnik V vaccine be approved by the EMA or by the Slovak State Institute for Drug Control. A similar view is expressed by the politicians of the Za ľudí coalition. Two MPs who criticized the government and Prime Minister Matovič for mismanaging the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic have left the party in recent weeks. Neither party has ruled out the possibility of reconstructing the government or leaving the government coalition due to the situation.

The third coalition partner, Sme rodina, does not mind the use of Sputnik V in Slovakia. Its position derives from the delays in vaccine deliveries from the EU and the fact that the Russian vaccine is already used in many countries around the world. Politicians from the largest opposition party, Smer-SD, also welcomed Slovakia's decision to purchase the Russian vaccine. In their opinion, the public safety and health must take precedence over any geopolitical games. The Hlas-SD party, which is in opposition, also considers the use of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine to be the optimal solution for the current situation. According to its politicians, however, it should be provided only on a voluntary basis. The leader of the SNS, Andrej Danko, who is out of parliament, remains a great supporter of the purchase of the Russian vaccine.

Diplomatic scandal with the participation of the prime minister. During an interview on Radio Express, a journalist asked Prime Minister Matovič what he had promised Russia in return for the Sputnik V vaccine. He replied with a joke that he had agreed to transfer the Ukrainian Transcarpathia. At the same time, he added that no one had presented any terms of the transaction. Matovič's words sparked a scandal in Ukraine. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of that country has demanded an official apology from the Prime Minister of Slovakia. It also called on the Slovak chargé d'affaires in Kiev, Matúš Korba, to whom it handed over a protest note, to condemn the statement.

Ivan Korčok announced on Facebook that he apologized to the head of Ukrainian diplomacy, Dmytro Kuleba, for Prime Minister Matovič's joke about Transcarpathia. As he emphasized, the statement of the Prime Minister of Slovakia was inappropriate. Korčok regretted the situation, especially in the context of the recent talks in Kiev on strengthening relations between the two countries.

Ultimately, the prime minister himself officially apologized for his statement. He stated that Slovakia's attitude to the territorial integrity of Ukraine was unambiguous, and that the Slovak authorities took the position of upholding international law. He also apologized to all Ukrainians for his "inappropriate reaction".

Scenarios of solving the political crisis. The political situation in Slovakia may develop in several directions in the coming weeks. Richard Sulík, deputy prime minister and leader of the SaS coalition party, proposes a government reconstruction. According to his concept, this would mean not only replacing some ministers, but theoretically also the prime minister. The position of the minister of health, which is strategic from the point of view of the pandemic, would probably be filled by a representative of a party other than OĽaNO. All four parties in the government coalition and the president would have to agree to the change. A government reconstruction scenario was already underway in March 2018, when Robert Fico was replaced as prime minister by Peter Pellegrini. That reconstruction was the result of mass anti-government demonstrations after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak.

Less likely, but still realistic, is the scenario of solving the political crisis through the dismissal of Health Minister Marek Krajčí. In this case, the health ministry would also likely be assigned to a party other than OĽaNO.

It cannot be ruled out that the parties SaS or Za ľudí who criticize the purchase of Russian vaccines will leave the government. The government coalition would still have enough votes in parliament to rule on its own. However, it would lose the constitutional majority necessary to implement many announced reforms. Prime Minister Matovič would have to negotiate planned constitutional changes with former coalition partners or opposition parties.

The permanent abandoning of the government coalition by the two parties could mean the formation of a minority government by Matovič. This would temporarily strengthen the prime minister's position as he could fill the vacant ministerial positions with his appointments. In the long run, however, such a situation would mean major problems with the day-to-day management of the state. In this scenario, the government would undoubtedly lose its stable parliamentary base. OĽaNO and Sme rodina officially have only 70 deputies, but often even members of these parties do not support the government's proposals. Therefore, it would be necessary to seek an agreement with the former coalition partners. A minority government could theoretically rule until the next parliamentary elections in 2024.

The scenario of the resignation of Prime Minister Matovič and early parliamentary elections is unlikely. The main parties of the government coalition - OĽaNO and Sme rodina - are against such a solution, but it may also be unfavourable for other coalition partners and the opposition. Some parties might not be included in the new parliament. The pandemic would undoubtedly also contribute to a low voter turnout, which could also hit some political parties. It cannot be ruled out that the next elections would be won by the same parties as today, and there would still be a problem with the formation of a new government.

In the event of the prime minister's resignation, it is also possible to form a technical government composed of experts. For many weeks, the former prime minister, Peter Pellegrini (Hlas-SD), has been advocating for this. Such a government could be appointed by President Zuzana Čaputová. Slovakia has no experience with an expert government, and therefore, it is currently the least likely scenario for a resolution to this political crisis.

Conclusions. The deteriorating epidemiological situation in Slovakia and problems with the supply of vaccines from the EU meant that Prime Minister Matovič decided to purchase the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, which is politically risky. His failure to consult with other coalition partners caused the biggest political crisis in Slovakia since the parliamentary elections. The decision to buy the vaccine was critically assessed by the coalition parties SaS and Za ľudí. President Čaputová took a similar position. At the same time, the prime minister's actions were positively received by some opposition politicians. It cannot be ruled out that in the coming weeks there will be a government restructuring or a withdrawal of these parties from the government coalition, which during the pandemic may be negatively assessed by voters. Convincing the public to accept the Russian vaccine will also be a big challenge for the Slovak authorities. The decision of the EMA, which for several days has been conducting an accelerated assessment of the compliance of Sputnik V with EU standards in terms of effectiveness, safety and quality, may have an impact on the preferences of Slovaks