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Slovakia: The approach to the Sputnik V vaccine divides society

The purchase of the Sputnik V vaccine by the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Igor Matovič (OĽaNO), and the resulting government crisis has caused a clear division in Slovak society. Public opinion polls have shown very high approval for the use of the Russian vaccine, while at the same time scepticism about the AstraZeneca vaccine. On the other hand, a poll conducted after the political crisis revealed significant changes in support for individual political parties. In general, the parties of the government coalition lost influence, while the parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition gained.

High acceptability for Sputnik V vaccine in Slovakia. The willingness of the Slovak society to vaccinate against COVID-19 is currently at its highest since the beginning of the pandemic. At the same time, the percentage of people refusing vaccinations is falling sharply. A public opinion poll conducted by the Slovak Academy of Sciences, MNFORCE, and Seesame at the end of March 2021 showed that approximately 42% of people plan to get vaccinated against the coronavirus. This is the best result since April 2020, when public opinion polls began to be conducted in this area. In the following months, interest among Slovaks for vaccinating themselves systematically decreased, and in December of last year it reached its lowest level at 22%. The trend began to reverse in recent weeks, when the epidemiological situation in Slovakia improved: the number of hospitalized patients decreased, and the daily increase in coronavirus infections began to decline. At the same time, some burdensome restrictions were introduced during this period: travel abroad was restricted, and a ban on leaving the house at night was introduced.

Surprising results regarding the approach to vaccines in Slovakia were indicated by a late February 2021 survey by the public opinion research centre Focus for the Markíza television and carried out after then prime minister Igor Matovič initially announced the purchase of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V, but before the official purchase of this preparation, triggering a political crisis. According to the Focus study, more or less the same number of people can be vaccinated with Sputnik V as with the vaccine from the US-German Pfizer/BioNTech consortium. At the same time, the Russian vaccine is best perceived by Slovaks when it comes to preparations that are already used or discussed in Slovakia. Exactly 55% of respondents are more or less prone to vaccination with Pfizer/BioNTech (35% of respondents more or less strongly reject this possibility), while vaccination with Sputnik V is accepted by 53% (35% of respondents are of the opposite opinion). The other two vaccines approved for use in Slovakia are much less popular: Moderna (47%) and AstraZeneca (43%). Low confidence in the latter medications is probably related to the suspension of its use by several European countries due to the detection of blood clots in some vaccinated people. The response to the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, which is still not approved on the Slovak market, is interesting. Only a quarter of the population accepts it, and 55% of those polled reject it.

The Focus study also took into account the party preferences of supporters of individual vaccines. In general, support for the Russian vaccine is characterized by two contradictory phenomena: it is popular with supporters of parties sceptical of the coronavirus vaccination process, and at the same time it is relatively acceptable to voters of fully supportive parties. For example, the Pfizer/BioNTech preparation is accepted by approximately 80% of OĽaNO voters, and 65% of them declare the possibility of receiving the Sputnik V vaccine. Interestingly, the adoption of the Russian vaccine is accepted by as many as 46% of the supporters of the Za ľudí party supporting vaccination, while 45% of them find it unacceptable. Sputnik V is also acceptable to 46% of the voters of the far-right and anti-vaccine party LSNS, while Pfizer/BioNTech is willing to accept just a quarter of its supporters. Adoption of AstraZeneca is declared by two thirds of Za ľudí or OĽaNO voters, but also by a high percentage of supporters of SaS (59.4%) and Progressive Slovakia (PS) (57.9%). Supporters of the leftist party Smer-SD (34%) and the aforementioned LSNS (24.3%) rate the British vaccine low. The Chinese Sinopharm, on the other hand, has the most supporters among the voters of the Hungarian Community Party (Strana maďarskej komunity, SMK), which may have been influenced by the fact of its use in Hungary.

Government crisis and its impact on party preferences. Completed in March this year the political crisis caused by the purchase of Sputnik V by Igor Matovič, which was not negotiated with the coalition partners, had a significant impact on the voting preferences of the Slovaks. Focus conducted a poll of support for individual political parties from 31 March to 7 April. So it was after Matovič had already announced his resignation from the post of prime minister. According to the poll, the election winner in Slovakia would be the opposition Hlas-SD party of former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini with the support of 22.3%. Richard Sulík's coalition SaS would be in second place, with 11.2% of those polled, just ahead of Robert Fico's third Smer-SD, whose support rose to 10.9%. OLaNO, which was victorious in the last parliamentary elections (then received 25% of the vote), would be in fourth place with 9.2% of the respondents. This is the weakest result of support for Matovič's movement in the Focus polls conducted since February 2020.

According to the poll, the only party in the government coalition to benefit from the recent political crisis is Sme rodina Boris Kollár. In the April survey, 7.4% would vote for it (in February this year it was 5.2%). During the March crisis, Kollár tried to mediate the conflict between SaS and OLaNO. He even threatened both coalition parties that he would push through early elections in the absence of a quick agreement. In addition, he set specific conditions for remaining in the coalition: payment of one-time social assistance to people most affected by the crisis, deferment of loan and energy payments, postponement of bailiffs' enforcement, financing of tourism and gastronomy, and free distribution of respirators. The smallest coalition party, Za ľudí, did not cross the election threshold in the April poll and received only 4.8% (in February it was 5.2%). The group's poor performance may also be related to the recent transition of some of its prominent politicians to Progressive Slovakia.

The three parties that are currently outside parliament would also join the National Council. 6.2% of respondents would vote for the PS (in February it was, however, 6.7%). KDH, led by the Marshal of the Voivodship Milan Majerský, could count on 5.7% of voters (previously it was 4.9%). The new unified party of the Hungarian minority, Aliancia, would also bring its representatives to parliament with 5% support. The split in LSNS, from which the group gathered around MEP Milan Uhrík and MP Milan Mazurek left, means a significant weakening of both LSNS itself and the new Republika party. 4.7% of the respondents would vote for the latter entity, while the "kotlebovs" could count on only 4.3% of the vote (two months earlier they could count on 6.6% of the vote).

Conclusions. Polls on vaccine approaches and political preferences show strong social polarization in Slovakia. Public opinion polls from February show very high support for Sputnik V, which can be explained by, among other factors, the lack of an adequate governmental information policy, a certain "information noise" on the part of the Russian Federation and some Slovak politicians, and lingering strong pro-Russian sympathies in Slovak society. It should be noted, however, that the Russian vaccine is still not approved for use in Slovakia. The Russian vaccine is supported by voters of both pro and anti-vaccine parties. The government crisis in March 2021 related to the purchase of Sputnik V caused significant damage to the image of the parties making up the parliamentary majority. According to a survey from April this year, the current ruling parties, OLaNO, SaS, and Sme rodina, could count on getting exactly the same number of MPs as OLaNO itself currently has – 53. The fourth member of the coalition, Za ľudí, would be on the electoral threshold. The opposition parties Smer-SD and Hlas-SD would have, according to the survey, a total of 64 members. On the other hand, the non-parliamentary parties (PS, KDH, and Aliancia) would receive a total of 33 seats. The far right, sceptical about vaccination, would not be in the new parliament. According to the results of the study, two scenarios of constructing a parliamentary majority would be possible: a broad, liberal-conservative coalition consisting of six political parties (OLaNO, SaS, Sme rodina, PS, KDH, Aliancia) without the participation of Smer-SD and Hlas-SD, and a more stable one the government of Peter Pellegrini with the participation of, inter alia, Smer-SD, Sme rodina, or Aliancia.