

The End of the Politician (in a Fashion): The Slovak and Ukrainian Elections

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The structures of politics have become so rigid, so distant, and ultimately so irrelevant to those who vote for them that a trend through countries can now be confirmed. Brittleness has set it. The part and election strategists have few answers, they, who saw the voter as yet another subject, another follower, another convert of a faith. The churches and their following have been turned into secular sceptics and the disenchanting. The non-politician who, nonetheless practices a craft of politics (we are all Aristotle's creatures), has become a burning disruption.

It started as series of shocks and disruptive announcements in 2016, confusing and upending the psephology across the establishment. That year yielded results that might have seen the abolition of the entire witchcraft. The Brexit referendum outcome; the US presidential vote – both were predicted as victories for the politician, the experienced practitioner. Along the way, there were a few pompous, gilded pretenders – Emmanuel Macron managed to give the impression of lacking the sheep's clothing he always donned. While his political achievement from the grind of the French political machine was impressive, he could never hide his establishment credentials. These are now revisiting him with brute reality.

Recent electoral developments to the centre and east of Europe suggest that not all populism need be filled with the toxins of violent divorce and nationalist disagreement. In recent days, a Slovakian lawyer and the comedian in Ukraine have added their spots to this new form of anti-political exuberance. Of these, the former is more conventional, though she remains salad green in experience.



While it is necessary to exercise caution in seeing a spectacular, rippling movement in the exceptional and irregular, the election of Zuzana Čaputová (image on the right) after Slovakia's presidential runoff on Saturday against establishment choice Maroš Šefčovic is seen as a veritable toot of approval for a new approach. "Perhaps," she claimed, "we

thought politics was only a sign of weakness, and today we see it as a sign of strength.”

Čaputová had been boosted by the mood which took a turn in February 2018. That month saw the killing of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, who had been rummaging through Slovak links with the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta crime syndicate, and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Their deaths propelled people to the streets with a zeal not seen since the anti-Communist demonstrations of 1989. While having a whiff of the hyperbolic, the killings have been [remarked](#) upon as having the momentous influence of the fall of New York’s Twin Towers in September 2001. This gave sufficient and shuddering notice to Prime Minister Robert Fico to hand in his resignation papers. The murkiness of the whole business was profound; the individual said to be responsible for directing the killings, Marián Kočner, purportedly had ties to Fico’s SMER Party and various government officials. The rot had set deep.

In what might be seen as a characteristic neuroses of Central European politics, the reaction to the killings came in parliamentary [laws](#) affecting journalistic practice rather than political corruption: a right of reply would have to be given to politicians; in the event this was not done, a fine might be imposed. The ghost of Fico had made its unwelcome appearance. “It’s the opposite of what should have been done,” [lamented](#) former Slovakian prime minister Iveta Radičová.

In a sense, this made the inroads by Čaputová, who defeated SMER’s choice, Šefčovic, even more striking. Far from seeing the European Union as an anti-nationalist bugbear to be slain or fled from, the new president shows a desire to bring Slovakia closer to its bosom. “My main focus is to bring about change in Slovakia, and for Slovakia to be a reliable and predictable partner of the European Union.”

The Ukrainian example is even more fitting, tinged with a degree of the exemplary absurd. A comedian whose main act is to play the good president finds himself in the running to become one. In politics, the comedian is usually inadvertent, an accident arising from a miscalculation of factors. He is magnificently idiotic (US Vice President Dan Quayle on thinking Latin was spoken in Latin America), or dangerously ignorant (US President George W. Bush: the French have no word for entrepreneur).

In Ukraine, with [half](#) the ballots counted, Volodymyr Zelenskiy was leading with some 30 percent. Incumbent Petro Poroshenko was lagging at 16 percent. Not even the usual electoral violations could sway the vote dramatically, despite assertions by the third placed “gas princess” Yulia Tymoshenko that she might have nabbed the second spot.

Zelenskiy’s satirical television show *Servant of the People* features the antics, and efforts of an Ordinary Citizen and history school teacher turned President. The dragon he slays, or at least aspires to, is that of corruption. Invariably he is accused of lacking political mettle and clear policies, though he is open to conversing in both Ukrainian and Russian, a point that has earned some traction in the Russian-speaking east of the country. The establishment tend to critique the politician from the perspective of seasoning: like fermented fish, he must have pungency and long experience.

Not Zelenskiy who, for the moment, has a certain sense of rude freshness about him. “People want to show the authorities the middle finger, and he is playing the role of this middle finger,” [surmised](#) political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko. Like other figures hostile to

the political formula, he has abandoned any semblance of orthodoxy. He is not interested in interviews; he eschews rallies for the most part. But he is something of a social media junkie.

For all that, he is not immune to that tradition of patronage, having ties with Igor Kolomoisky, one of Ukraine's wealthiest and sketchiest oligarchs. Think Kolomoisky, think the [collapse](#) of PrivatBank. Depending on viewpoints, Kolomoisky was simply incompetent in causing the loss of \$248 million; or he was a ruthless marauder who raided the bank's assets to the tune of billions of dollars.

Zelenskiy's retort to [claims](#) that he is merely Kolomoisky's closely controlled puppet has been simple: attacking my oligarch necessitates attacking your dubious business dealings and even more dubious business partners; "are you," he asked pointedly of Poroshenko, "Mr. Synarchuk's puppet?" The Ukrainian defence sector is pickled by the stench of the association between Poroshenko's former business partner Oleh Svynarchuk and son Ihor.

Such instances supply notes of truly dark humour in the age of the finite politician, and one that promises to play out in the second, run-off election. And will debating Poroshenko matter in a now promised debate? No, [claims](#) the comedian. "What difference does it make?" A fond farewell has been made to political tradition - for the moment, at least.

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