Government transition in the time of the COVID-19 crisis: Slovak case

Juraj Nemec
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Abstract

Purpose – Most media evaluate Slovakia as the most successful European country in the fight against the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Such excellent results have been achieved in a really specific period – the change of the government overlapped the initial days of the outbreak of the pandemic in the country. The goal of this viewpoint paper is to investigate how individual public leaders (Prime Ministers) shaped the governance response, how these key political leaders have helped to make the transition to a new government so seamless in times of crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative approach is used to map the situation and to show how key political leaders shaped the governance response to the crisis. The official government COVID-19 web page and core national media were investigated to collect the necessary information for our research.

Findings – The most positive finding of this article is the fact that the departing Prime Minister Pellegrini did not decide to wait till the end of office in a passive or moderate way, but managed during last days of office of “his” government to realize a set of really comprehensive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Slovakia. Politics has been set a bit aside; coalition and opposition parties prioritized the need to fight COVID-19 instead of the need for permanent political fights.

Originality/value – The article introduces the example of the political “takeover” during the crisis, which has been realized in such positive ways, especially thanks to the fact that Pellegrini behaved as a real national leader just a few days before leaving office.

Keywords Slovakia, COVID-19, Government change

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

With approximately 5.5 million inhabitants, Slovakia is one of the smaller members of the European Union, located in the heart of the European continent. In terms of epidemiologic aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, most media evaluate Slovakia as the most successful European country in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 (see, for example, Walker and Smith, 2020). As of 15 May 2020, Slovakia had 1,480 registered cases diagnosed with COVID-19 and only 27 deaths, while the number of recovered patients was 1,131, and 135,902 tests had been carried out. Figure 1 shows how good these data are from an international perspective.

According to most experts, the positive health outcomes have been achieved through very early and effective measures and thanks to the positive response (compliance) by the Slovak people. Early, strict and effective measures to cope with the crisis were possible only thanks to strong political leadership at all levels of government (Kettl, 2006).

However, in the specific case of Slovakia, the quality of this leadership was achieved in a really specific period. More specifically, a national election was held on 29 February 2020 in Slovakia, which resulted in a full change of political powers at the national level. The previous coalition parties (Smer, SNS and Most) failed and only one of them (Smer) managed to get seats in Parliament. The opposition parties (OLANO, Sme rodina, SAS and Za ludi) won the election and created the new government coalition with a constitutional majority.

The resultant change of the government overlapped the initial days of the outbreak of the pandemic in the country; the first COVID-19 case in Slovakia was identified on 6 March 2020.
and the new coalition government was appointed by the president on 21 March 2020. In this situation, the first steps to fight the pandemic were realized by Prime Minister Pellegrini and his (dominantly left-wing) government, but the continuity of the government response was the responsibility of Prime Minister Matovic and his (mixed political orientation) government.

This very specific situation of government transition in Slovakia calls for an investigation because it can provide interesting lessons and contribute to the expansion of knowledge related to political leadership theory (see, for example, Boin and Hart, 2003; Cook, 1998; Leach and Wilson, 2002; Torfing et al., 2019). Moreover, it can also help to improve political leadership “practice”. The goal of this viewpoint paper is to investigate how individual public leaders (prime ministers) shaped the governance response, and how these key political leaders have helped to make the transition to a new government so seamless in a time of crisis.

The method is the secondary analysis of a published information. As the source the official government web page on COVID-19 (www.korona.sk) and three most frequently read newspapers (www.pravda.sk, www.novycas.sk and www.sme.sk) were monitored.

Slovak government change at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic
Slovakia, founded on 1 January 1993, is a country that has never had to cope with an outbreak of any major infectious disease. Like every other country, at least in Europe, Slovakia did not react immediately to the pandemic risks when the outbreaks started in China beyond having general emergency plans and allocating resources. However, when the risks became evident, the Slovak government was one of the first to deliver swift and strict responses, despite being in a government transition period.

The first activities connected with the COVID-19 pandemic had already started prior to the national elections when the risks were becoming evident. For example, on 14 February 2020, a system was organized at the Slovak borders to identify people who were ill. On 27 February 2020, the Security Council announced the first concrete anti-pandemic measures, namely health status border controls at all Slovak airports and selected border crossings, especially at the border with Austria. It also initiated purchases of necessary protective aids. The most important decision of this meeting was the activation of the Crisis Staff (the body responsible for country management in a crisis), located at the Ministry of Health.

Despite the massive election failure, Prime Minister Pellegrini decided not to wait for the “takeover” with limited and formal action and it also thanks to his personal involvement that

Figure 1. Relative spread of COVID-19 infection, selected countries (15 May 2020)

Source(s): Author, based on data published by John Hopkins Institute
Slovakia adopted the necessary anti-epidemic measures very early and in a more comprehensive way compared to most European countries. The first meeting of the Crisis Staff during the COVID-19 pandemic was held on 6 March 2020, the same day that the first COVID-19 case was detected in Slovakia.

The first measures adopted by the Crisis Staff were relatively soft – restricting visits in hospitals, social care establishments and prisons. The Crisis Staff also recommended that everybody arriving in Slovakia had to stay in voluntary quarantine, that cities and non-profit organizations not organize any mass activities, and that churches not organize religious activities. It also cancelled all international trips of public officials and prohibited all flights from Italy to Slovakia. The final measure was the establishment of emergency contact phone numbers in all regions of the country. The prime minister encouraged citizens not to travel and not to participate in mass activities.

The next steps were initiated very soon afterwards. Even before the next meeting of the Crisis Staff, the regional self-governments voluntarily decided to close secondary schools and universities and, furthermore, stopped all contact activities and switched to on-line education. After its meetings on 9 March and 12 March 2020, really comprehensive sets of anti-pandemic measures were announced by the Crisis Staff. These measures mirrored the successful approaches made by China and other Asian countries and were aimed at trying to limit the spread of the virus as much as possible. A restricted emergency situation was formally announced on 11 March 2020; this was very early compared to most other European countries. The scale of the emergency was restricted to the healthcare sector and social care establishments for the elderly. For the rest of the country, “an extraordinary regime” status was announced.

With the exception of listed specific groups, anyone arriving in Slovakia after 12 March 2020 from abroad was required to stay in home quarantine for 14 days. From 16 March, almost all retail shops and services were closed; exemptions were granted in a limited number of instances, especially for grocery stores and drugstores (later on, grocery stores and drugstores were closed on Sundays). In shops that were permitted to be open, only one customer was allowed for every 25 sqm of sales space. All shops were required to provide disinfectant or gloves at the entrance. A distance of a minimum of two metres was to be respected, including at the checkout area. All sport facilities were closed from 13 March 2020, and the organization of sports, social and cultural events was prohibited from 9 March 2020. The formal state decision to close all schools and preschool facilities was announced on 12 March 2020 (as indicated above, however, most schools had already been closed on a voluntary basis). Planned operations and other non-urgent treatment in the healthcare sector were postponed. The body temperature of patients was to be measured upon entering health facilities. Selected hospitals were expected to construct drive-through points to test people in their cars for COVID-19. Specialized hospitals to treat COVID-19 were established in all regions. All public worship was prohibited (this applied to all churches in Slovakia); the Internet or other means were to be put to use to make worship accessible to people. All border crossings were closed from 12 March 2020. International public transport (trains, buses, boats) was restricted from 13 March 2020. Free railway transport for students was terminated. Domestic public transport was put on school holiday transport schedules.

The list of selected core measures (listed above) adopted in early March, during the final days of the Pellegrini government, clearly documents the will of the “departing” prime minister to use his last days in office to help the country to fight the COVID-19 pandemic as a real leader. Moreover, to secure an effective transition, during the final days of the Pellegrini government, Prime Minister-designate Matovic was invited to participate in all the meetings of the Security Council of the Slovak Republic and all the meetings of the Crisis Staff.

Thanks to a comprehensive set of necessary anti-epidemic measures, the new government of Prime Minister Matovic did not need to start from zero after coming to power on 21 March
2020 so his task was to just react to new developments arising from the pandemic. Due to the continuing spread of COVID-19 in late March and early April, the new Matovic government decided to implement stricter anti-pandemic measures. From 25 March 2020, all citizens were required to wear protective face masks in all public spaces. The minimum distance between people was to be two metres. All citizens were advised to stay at home as much as possible and to limit any kind of mobility. Shops that remained open were instructed to serve only people over 65 years of age between 9 a.m. and 12 noon; age was verified using identification cards. High quality respirators were not available for sale to ordinary citizens. The most sensitive measure was the decision about compulsory state-organized quarantine after 6 April 2020. A law making it possible to track the location of all mobile phones was passed. A curfew was put in place during the Easter holidays, with limited exemptions such as shopping, travelling to work, health purposes and individual recreation in the surrounding forests and countryside.

The transition to a new government was not perfect, as could be expected. Even in the times of a real pandemic crisis, politics were not set aside, but they were significantly downsized. The opposition, led by Smer, voted in favour of most of the laws proposed by the newly elected government – laws focussing on the fight against the pandemic. The only exception was the law making it possible to track the location of all mobile phones; in this instance, Smer not only voted against this proposed legislation but also sent this law for review by the Constitutional Court (the Constitutional Court claimed some parts of this law were unconstitutional).

On the other hand, the newly designated prime minister and “his” ministers (not surprisingly) tended to blame the previous government for late and ineffective actions, although in many cases they were not at fault. A very good example of this is the criticism that the Pellegrini government ordered only home quarantine, rather than centralized and state-controlled quarantine, for all people returning to Slovakia from other countries. However, a slightly delayed start of this measure is clearly not the fault of the previous government. A centralized quarantine system came into effect on 6 April 2020; this was two weeks after the appointment of the new government.

The most frequent criticism of the previous government is connected with the issue of fiscal stability and is misused to excuse the very late and small scale start of the realization of the necessary economic measures to prevent the drastic socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. It is true that the fiscal year 2019 ended with a deficit at the level of 1.3% of GDP and not with a planned balanced budget. It is also partly true that overspending in 2019 to some extent negatively impacted the amount of available resources to cope with the current crisis. However, this kind of argument is just a political excuse for the late and marginal support to the national economy by the Matovic government. By 15 May 2020, only approximately 100m EUR had been “pumped in” to prop up the economy in Slovakia. The Slovak Council for Budgetary Responsibility had already made a statement in mid-April concerning this: “Strict and country-wide quarantine measures serve as a drastic diet by hunger strike. The short-term effects are very visible, but this kind of cure cannot be used in a long-term perspective – it might lead to self-destruction” (www.rozpoctovarada.sk).

The Slovak economic “drop” has been enormous and a comprehensive cure is necessary, but has not yet been provided in the needed scale. The core problem is that such a limited response is not due to the lack of resources. Resources are available. For example, the European Union permitted the use of remaining EU fund allocations to fight against the consequences of COVID-19. Thanks to this decision by the European Union, for example, Slovakia should have approximately 4–5bn EUR available to implement immediate measures, plus it borrowed an extra 4bnEUR via the issue of government bonds on international financial markets in early May (from this sum 1bn is available to be used to support the national economy).
Conclusions
This viewpoint article maps the transition to a new Slovak government, which happened exactly during the starting phase of the spread of COVID-19 in Slovakia, from the point of the capacity of the leaders (the prime ministers of the old and current governments) to make the transition to a new government as seamless as possible in a time of crisis. The most positive finding is the fact that the departing Prime Minister Pellegrini did not decide to govern in a passive or moderate way until the end of his term in office, but rather used the last days of his government to realize a set of really comprehensive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Slovakia. Moreover, he also tried to ensure continuity by inviting the newly elected Prime Minister Matovic to work together (especially within the crisis structures) before the “office change” took place. Another finding is that for this short period of a real crisis, some of the normal politics has been set aside; the coalition and opposition parties prioritized the need to fight COVID-19 instead of the need for permanent political fights (“everything proposed by the opposite party is bad”), which is typical for the Slovak (or any other post-communist) government (see, for example, Deegan-Krause, 2006).

This article cannot investigate in depth why the transition has been realized in such positive ways, especially why Prime Minister Pellegrini behaved as a real national leader just a few days before leaving office. Having more time and having access to more comprehensive information would be a necessary precondition for such an analysis. Perhaps the core factor was responsibility; alternatively, it may have been a long-term strategy, or perhaps it was a mix of these two explanations, but it is not yet possible to draw any definitive conclusions.

The aim of this article is also not to investigate why Slovakia managed the COVID-19 spread (at least its first phase) so well – also this dimension would request other very specific and interdisciplinary research, connecting health, public policy and other factors together.

Note

References
About the author
Juraj Nemec is Professor of Public Finance and Public Management at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic and at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University Banska Bystrica, Slovakia. He served and serves in different positions in international organizations in the public administration area and he published almost 500 scientific and professional articles, books and book chapters, including papers in most prestigious public administration journals. Juraj Nemec is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: juraj.nemec@umb.sk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com