

Election changes may help extremists

The amendment may not fulfil the expectations of its authors.



Back in November 2013, Slovakia woke up to a morning surprise when far-right extremist Marian Kotleba beat his Smer-nominated opponent Vladimír Maňka in the run-off for the governor's post in Banská Bystrica Region.

A similar situation might be repeated in the future if the parliament adopts an amendment concerning regional elections that, among other things, seeks to change the voting from two rounds to just one, as some analysts warn that this may help extremists to win more regional governor seats.

While the coalition politicians talk mostly about saving money on the second round, some observers also see other reasons behind the proposal.

“I assume that behind this initiative and unusually strong political will to change the election rules is the effort to prevent the creation of unpredictable anti-coalition alliances for the second round,” sociologist Oľga Gyárfášová told The Slovak Spectator.

Additionally, Political analyst Erik Láštík from Comenius University in Bratislava calls the proposed changes “political”, explaining the current ruling coalition probably expects it will maintain its current posts or even increase their number.

“Yet the expectations of the parties do not have to become reality,” Láštík told The Slovak Spectator, adding that “regarding the traditionally low turnout, even an unexpected candidate supported by disciplined voters can win”.

Two major changes

Under the current rules, Slovak citizens and also foreigners having permanent residency in a municipality belonging to a specific self-governing region may vote for the regional governor and also regional deputies. If a candidate for governor fails to receive a majority of votes, a second round takes place to which the two most successful candidates advance.

The coalition parties are currently proposing two major changes: to hold only one-round of voting and to hold the vote on the same day as the municipal elections.

In order to achieve the latter goal, the MPs want to extend the election term for the higher territorial units' bodies to five years, on a one-time basis. The change would concern the voting scheduled for 2017 and would enable the regional and municipal elections to be held on the same day in 2022, the SITA newswire reported.

After the 2022 election, the tenure of regional governors would revert back to four years.

The original proposal concerning the regional elections introduced in 2001 suggested the one-round vote, but it was later changed to two rounds in the parliament.

“The changes had the same denominator – fear of the potential ‘success’ of the Hungarian coalition parties and the effort to prevent the victory of a ‘Hungarian’ candidate in a one-round vote,” Láštík explained.

This “strategy” was successful in the Nitra Region, where the “Slovak” candidate won, though most of the regional deputies were members of the then-Party of Hungarian Coalition, the analyst added.

Seeking higher turnout

One of the main official reasons to change the regional elections to a one-round vote is that in practice more voters attend the first round of the regional elections as they select not only the regional governor, but also the regional deputies.

“The turnout in the second round is very low, so these elections do not actually reflect the will of voters,” the authors of the amendment said, as quoted by SITA, adding that the state allocates a great deal of money to the second round so its abolishment would actually bring some savings.

Moreover, holding the regional elections on the same day as the municipal voting may increase the generally low turnout. Back in 2013 it was only 20.11 percent of eligible voters, while the turnout in 2014 municipal elections accounted for 48.34 percent.

One of the reasons for this is that the public does not fully understand what the self-governing region and its competences are, admitted PM Robert Fico during the December 8 hour of questions in the parliament.

The proposal to lengthen the term of regional governors for the 2017-2022 term, however, requires a constitutional majority of 90 votes. This means that the coalition will also need some votes from opposition deputies.

MP for Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) Martin Klus, who also plans to run for the regional governor post in Banská Bystrica, says they would not have a problem with supporting the change, but are asking the coalition not to abolish the two-round vote in return, the TASR newswire wrote.

“If they do not accept it, we will abstain from the vote,” Klus added for TASR.

More extremists feared

While the coalition politicians agree on the benefits of the changes and claim they may increase the interest of voters in regional bodies, Gyárfášová says people may be confused, as several candidates run for the same posts in regional and municipal elections.

“The complexity of selection may weaken the interest in elections, but also the careful and thoughtful choice of candidates, and thus also the bond between the voters and their representatives,” she added.

The changes may also weaken the independent candidates, according to MP for the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) Viera Dubačová.

Political scientist Tomáš Nociar, meanwhile, has warned of the success of radical candidates if the regional election changes to only one-round voting. The two-round system is, according to him, a protective mechanism from extremism as the extremists benefit from the votes that are scattered among the strong candidates for governor in the first round.

Gyárfášová also criticises the fact that the changes are being adopted without a broader discussion among politicians and experts and without

handing in clear arguments to its favour, calling it “short-sighted and wilful”.

“The election rules are a very significant part of democracy; they should not be changed purposefully, for the current moment which can suit the current government,” she added.

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