

**Slovakia****Anger at corruption fires Caputova towards Slovakia presidency**

Liberal lawyer's rapid rise shows generational change and reaction to populism



© AFP

James Shotter in Pezinok 3 HOURS AGO

Six years ago, Zuzana Caputova was a little-known lawyer fighting the expansion of a toxic landfill site in Pezinok, a small town outside the Slovak capital, Bratislava.

Now, the anti-corruption activist — who entered national politics barely a year ago — is the surprise frontrunner to become Slovakia's next president, as the country prepares for its first national vote since its politics were upended by the [murder](#) of a young investigative journalist and his fiancée.

Pro-European and unabashedly liberal, Ms Caputova's lead over a dozen other candidates has been powered by a wave of popular frustration at deep-seated problems with [corruption](#), which Jan Kuciak was investigating before he and Martina Kusnirova were gunned down in their home 13 months ago.

Ms Caputova — who would be Slovakia's first woman president — has made “against evil” her campaign slogan, and the 45-year-old said that she would fight “corruption, the misuse of power,

extremism, and lying in public life”.

“After the . . . death of Jan Kuciak and his partner and the massive reaction of the public in the squares [around Slovakia], I realised that the topic of justice that I’ve focused on all my life had become an issue not just for lawyers and investigative journalists, but also for the public in general,” she said in an interview.

“I want to be an active president who not only criticises . . . the system but also makes concrete proposals, such as how judicial institutions can work more independently of political power.”

Since joining the EU in 2004, Slovakia has boomed, attracting so much foreign investment that, on a per capita basis, it has become the world’s biggest carmaker.

But it has also been dogged by corruption. Public anger at such problems boiled over in the wake of Kuciak’s murder, and ultimately forced the [resignation](#) of prime minister Robert Fico, who had dominated Slovak politics for more than a decade.

“Caputova’s success shows how the murder of Kuciak and the protests that followed have changed Slovak politics. There is a demand and an impatience from the part of society that was mobilised by those protests for something new,” said Milan Nic, a fellow of the German Council on Foreign Relations.

“It’s the beginning of a change of generation in Slovak politics. And it shows a side of local politics — the counter-reaction to populism — that is often overlooked outside the region.”

After winning the 14-year fight over the Pezinok landfill, Ms Caputova entered national politics in 2017, joining the newly-founded group Progressive Slovakia.

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Six weeks ago, she was polling fourth or fifth. But after another candidate withdrew and endorsed her, her support surged. She now heads a field that reflects the deep polarisation in Slovak politics, with nationalist and far-right candidates facing more moderate figures.

A poll on March 1 put her on 52.9 per cent, ahead of Maros Sefcovic, Slovakia’s European commissioner, on 16.7 per cent, and the anti-migrant hardliner Stefan Harabin, on 11.4 per cent.

Ms Caputova’s emergence has drawn a ferocious and sometimes sexist backlash from her opponents, who have attacked her as inexperienced, dismissed her as “an unknown girl” and accused her of being too liberal for Slovakia.

Far-right critics have sought to link her to their bogeyman, George Soros, while Mr Fico, whose Smer party backs Mr Sefcovic, said her liberal stance on LGBT issues amounted to supporting

“homosexual madness”.

Uncertainty over turnout, and a blackout on polling two weeks before Saturday’s first round vote, make it hard to judge the attacks’ impact. But Ms Caputova’s allies remain confident she will make it into the second round on March 30, and then defeat either Mr Sefcovic or Mr Harabin.

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Voters in Bratislava and Pezinok said they liked Ms Caputova’s non-confrontational manner and openness and said it was time the country finally elected a woman as its head of state.

“I know what she did in getting the landfill cancelled, and I think she deserves to be president. I want a president who will be there for people,” said Justyna, a pensioner from Pezinok, who voted for Mr Fico in the last presidential elections in 2014. “I thought Fico wanted to be there for the people as well, but now I don’t think so.”

Slovakia’s president has less power than the prime minister but plays a key role in appointing senior judges and the prosecutor-general. Ms Caputova is confident she can use the role to influence Slovak life.

“When I was a lawyer, I always stood on the side of people that have been wronged in some way,” she said. “As president you can be the voice of the people too, and create legitimate pressure on the institutions to act in a legal and fair way.”

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