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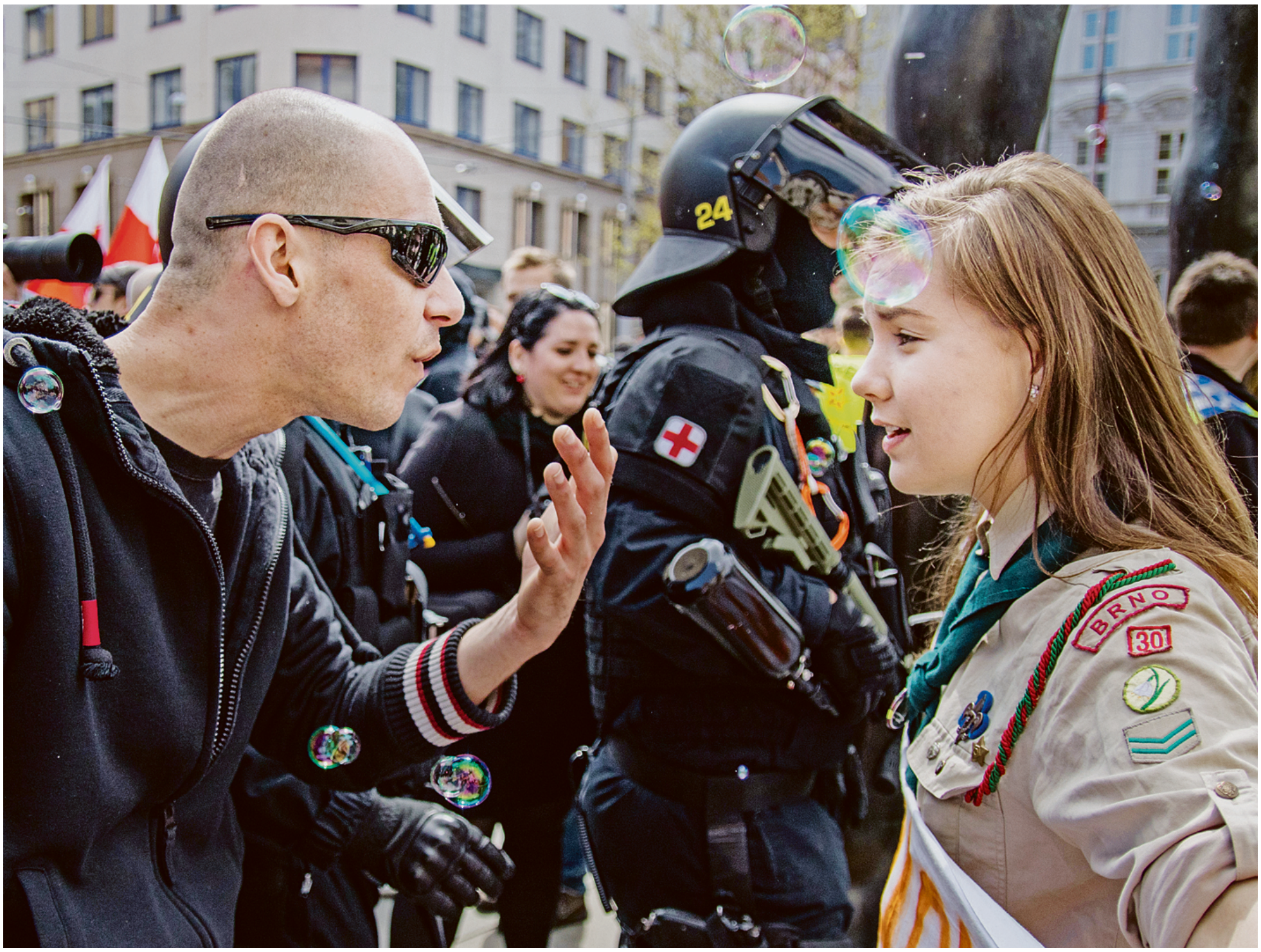

The photograph of Girl Scout Lucie Myslíková, aged 16, confronting an extremist was taken in the Czech city of Brno, during the May 1, 2017 anti-Nazi protest. **Photo: Vladimír Čičmanec**

Elections: Power test for the far right

By Michaela Terenzani
Spectator staff

WHEN Marian Kotleba won the regional governor election in Banská Bystrica, people who had been observing the Slovak extremists scene called it the first step for his party into big politics.

Sure enough, two and a half years later, 14 people from the far-right People's Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), including Kotleba himself, assumed their MP posts. The party then scored more than 8 percent in the national election, leaving most observers of the Slovak political scene astonished, since few of them had expected the party known for its anti-Semitic and racist views to make it that far. Currently, the polls show support for ĽSNS oscillating around 10 percent at the national level.

In the eight regions of Slovakia, the party has governor candidates who may have a good result in two: Banská Bystrica and Nitra. In all the regions, the ĽSNS is going to try and fill as many seats in the regional councils as possible.

That is one of the reasons why the upcoming regional elections are considered the political event of 2017 in Slovakia.

All eyes on Banská Bystrica

"A potential failure in Banská Bystrica Region may lead to a weakening of Marian Kotleba's position within the party, which is also why he hesitated with his candidacy for so long," expert on extremism Tomáš Nociar told The Slovak Spectator.

Kotleba was in fact one of the last candidates to announce he would run for re-election, just before the deadline for submitting candidacies in early September. He was elected to the post in November 2013 with over 70,000 votes.

Despite the growing examples of misconduct from Kotleba's office, published polls have suggested that he still appeals to a significant number of voters.

"What we know about ĽSNS voters suggests that they do not perceive the activities of Marian Kotleba as regional governor critically and they are rather inclined to perceive the information about his possible failures as a campaign by the establishment," sociologist Michal Vašečka from Masaryk University in Brno told The Slovak Spectator.

On the other hand, a significant popular movement has risen against extremism in general and particularly against Kotleba as governor in the region. There have been efforts to unite democratic forces into one significant candidate, the one who will come out of the polls as the strongest opponent against the incumbent governor.

Strongest candidate found

Based on the Focus poll from September, that strongest candidate is entrepreneur Ján Lunter, a known producer of vegetarian spreads commonly sold in supermarkets around the country. In the poll, Lunter received 30.9 percent of the vote, compared to Kotleba with 22.2 percent.

Other candidates have been reluctant to trust the poll at first, but in early October Martin Klus, a political scientist who is a member of the Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and who ran with the support of the parliamentary opposition, and Stanislav Mičev, the director of the Slovak National Uprising Museum in Banská Bystrica who ran as independent, gave up. By the time The Slovak Spectator went to print on October 26, there were 10 governor candidates in the region.

"Lunter will certainly need the votes of candidates who will decide to step down in his favour like Klus did," Focus polling agency director Martin Slosiarik told The Slovak Spectator.

He noted that the difference between Lunter and Kotleba in the September poll is not significant enough to jump into conclusions that Kotleba will be defeated.

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