The Russia–Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia

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Abstract

The report opens with a reflection on the political actors who have been labelled and analysed as populists in the modern history of Slovakia. Then, it assesses the impact of the Russian aggression in Ukraine by taking into account the broader group of radical challengers to the liberal-democratic notion of "politics as usual" in Slovakia who operate beyond the populist Radical Right. Overall, the report finds that while the Russia–Ukraine war has contributed to the radicalization of the public discourse in Slovakia, it has not engendered new populist or radical actors nor caused notable changes in the ideational profiles and political strategies of existing ones.

Keywords: radicalization; Slovakia; Radical Right; Direction–Social Democracy (SMER); Russia–Ukraine war

The argument presented in this report is that while Russia's aggression in Ukraine has contributed to a radicalization of the political discourse in Slovakia, the main avenue of such radicalization was not the Radical Right or right-wing populism. The Radical Right parties were pro-Russian long before Putin's war of aggression, have not changed their stance as a consequence of it, and have studiously avoided any suggestion of support for it, at least as far as the invasion itself is concerned. The issue did not cause significant realignment or institutional changes in the Radical Right scene. Nor are Radical Right parties the sole purveyors of an oblique pro-Russian stance. They may have been outperformed in this respect by a non-radical, centre-right party with motivations rooted in Slovakia's domestic political conflict.

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A brief historical outline of (suspected) populists in Slovakia

Accurate or otherwise, reflection on the populist phenomena in Slovak politics has often suffered from the same general problems afflicting populist studies and anti-populist activism and journalism elsewhere. In the case of academic treatments, we have witnessed conceptual stretching, confusing populism with its thicker ideational fellow-travellers (nativism, authoritarianism), and promoting populism to the status of the all-encompassing category subsuming other ideational constructs to which, in practice, populism often serves as a means to convey their messages more efficiently. Beyond the academy, anti-populist movements have also engaged in broad-brush engagement, with "populist" becoming an "officially sanctioned slur" for politics in general, which risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater and, in any event, constitutes a morally unacceptable way of marshalling popular support against bogus messages and dangerous ideas. With this caveat in mind, it is helpful to summarize the several ways of "doing politics" in Slovakia's modern history that have been—accurately or otherwise—labelled as "populist".

At first, the populist label was a part of various attempts at capturing and explaining the tribulations the young and underdeveloped Slovak liberal-democratic polity was experiencing in the 1990s. These included the post-1989 surge in Slovak ethnic nationalism demanding broad political autonomy or secession from the federal republic of Czechoslovakia, created in 1989–90 and dissolved in December 1992, when the Czechs and Slovaks went their separate ways.

Another powerful source of such reflection was a combination of effective nationalist and populist mobilization under the auspices of the shrewd populist politician Vladimír Mečiar. His political success and attempt to retain power led the Slovak polity to the verge of having its liberal content entirely hollowed out and continuing as an illiberal democratic facade. Later a series of articulate, yet varying, anti-establishment appeals by new political parties distancing themselves from mečiarist populism as well as the civic-democratic and largely liberal opposition that defeated it in the 1998 elections were analysed as forms of "populism".[1]

Among the parties labelled populist from this first wave of anti-establishment challengers, Direction–Social Democracy (SMER) came to dominate and shape Slovak politics in the 2000s and continues to do so to the present day. In the past

two decades, the party has undergone a series of ideological and strategic transformations, of which some can be clarified with the help of the notion of populism, while others should not be. The second decade of this century has witnessed the rise of a second generation of anti-establishment challengers, which includes the anti-corruption and market liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party in 2010 as well as the anti-corruption movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO). While often called populist, these parties' appeals—undeniably anti-establishment in their nature—have been primarily informed by anti-corruption and calls for integrity in politics.

A few years later, a genuinely Radical Right outfit, the People's Party–Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), broke through on the regional level and entered the national parliament in 2016. Finally, in 2016 the Slovak polity witnessed the rise of the conservative We are Family party, which described itself explicitly as on a mission to "purify" Slovak politics and did not shy away from Radical Right tropes on occasion, particularly about immigration. As expected, both of these two new challengers have been analysed in terms of populism and extremism. All of these actors, at certain points in their political activity, presented—in varying degrees and forms—some kind of challenge to "politics as usual" in the Slovak polity. Populism—properly conceptualized—has been, and continues to be, a part of the appeal of some of them. Yet, in itself, populism hardly explains the nature of the challenges confronting Slovak politics.

Right-wing populism and other (radical) challengers since the 2020 elections

 Not all challenger parties in the Slovak political system are right-wing populists. Some would qualify as mainstream right-wing parties that (on occasion) adopt a "populist style", but a sustained combination of nativism and authoritarianism and populism is not the defining aspect of their appeals. Moreover, the right-wing populists do not present the single dominant threat to the quality of liberal democracy in Slovakia.

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1. The author has contributed to this state of affairs by popularizing the term "centrist populism" with reference to these parties, the politics of which—he now contends—could certainly better be explained by a conceptual elaboration on the term "anti-establishment politics" rather than populism proper.

As for the political fate of the challengers listed above, SaS has never been Radical Right, and in the meantime, it has practically become the mainstream party. OĽaNO retained and repeatedly reinvented its anti-establishment appeal and the *form of the anti-party,* deliberately eschewing a meaningful organizational structure. The movement described itself as a platform for promoting independent (read: non-partisan) personalities to the parliament to address problems in the political process, hence the name.[2] Characteristically, the movement has undergone a series of reinvention cycles before each election since 2012, in terms of candidates but also electoral appeals. The typical OĽaNO candidate list has been a rather odd mix of anti-corruption activists and whistle-blowers (often with centrist or liberal inclinations) and conservative activists from the traditional Christian as well as newer charismatic (Pentecostal) milieus. The glue that has held this somewhat motley crew of candidates has been a staunch commitment to combat political corruption.

While OĽaNO satisfies both conditions—being right-wing and populist—it has never become a Radical Right party. Following a vote of no-confidence in the OĽaNO-led government in December 2022, an internal discussion started regarding the separation of the party's "liberal" and "conservative" wings. The latter might take the movement in a more radical direction by engaging in culture wars and vigorous opposition to "gender ideology" and the rights of trans people.

The We are Family party broke out in 2016 as a socially conservative and paternalistic party for ordinary people. The party explicitly cast its approach in contrast to the elitist manner of previous conservative champions in Slovakia. The party appeal is primarily based on the curious charisma of the party leader Boris Kollár—a millionaire with an eccentric private life (normally incompatible with any version of conservatism). Kollár is known for occasional anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric outbursts. But more importantly, We are Family is a political project of predatory opportunists who try to marshal support from a paternalist but the largely non-Left and likely non-religious electorate. Being both right-wing and populist, We are Family is not a Radical Right party. Like in the case of OĽaNO, it lacks the combination of nativism and authoritarianism at the core of its ideology. While the party leader in the past expressed sympathies for Austria's FPÖ, Italy's Lega, and France's FN, currently, such alliances do not bring any political profits to the party's project.

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2.   In Slovakia, independent candidates are barred from running in parliamentary elections.

The People's Party–Our Slovakia (ĽSNS)—nowadays officially known by its prefix Kotlebistas—ĽSNS (K-ĽSNS)—broke out on the regional level in 2013 and made it into the parliament in 2016. The party has been analysed in terms of both the Radical Right and political extremism. In fact, it is part of the family of Central European Far Right parties—such as Hungary's Jobbik—which, from the point of view of traditional comparativist schemes, could best be described as a hybrid of Radical Right and extremist political programmes. While ĽSNS was established by extremist cadres, for the sake of public consumption, it has developed a political programme that is radical and vaguely anti-systemic, albeit carefully avoiding refutation of democracy. However, while placing extremist ideas on the back burner for the sake of smoother participation in the game of democratic politics, the party has offered a series of dog-whistle gestures aimed at its extremist supporters (and mocking the establishment). One such gesture—handing out checks to needy families in the amount of €1,488 —saw party leader Marián Kotleba accused of propagating extremism and put on trial. The pending threat of four years in prison caused tension within the party. Kotleba started preparing for eventual prison time by packing the party leadership with loyalists. This alienated the group around Milan Uhrík, MEP, who led a splinter group which left the party to establish the Far Right Republika party in 2020. The split resulted from purely personal and organizational disagreements rather than programmatic and tactical clashes. The new Republika adopted slightly more consensual stances while the rump ĽSNS embarked upon further radicalization, including a return to anti-Roma marches. As a result, Republika took over most of the electoral support of the old ĽSNS, and the rump party has since languished with low-single-digit support in opinion polls.

Both ĽSNS and Republika are Radical Right and populist parties. They also stand out notably from the rest of the political spectrum in terms of their attitude to the Russia–Ukraine war. Paradoxically, their closest ally in both the fight against "the system" and the positions taken on the war is the left-wing populist SMER, which bills itself as a social democratic party.

The once anti-establishment party SMER has undergone a series of transformations over the two decades. While continuing to identify as a social democratic party, SMER has lately come to rely on appeals that are both socially paternalistic (in a generally leftist vein) as well as culturally conservative. The latest addition to its ideological tool belt has been authoritarianism. Thus, the party, which started life with a younger, urban and educated voter base, has ended up as a radical actor with messages appealing to a historically paternalistic left-wing

electorate (pensioners), conspiracists, and those who question Slovakia's geopolitical orientation. In fact, SMER has become the functional equivalent of the Radical Right for members of these constituencies that identify as left-wing.

Like Mečiar in the 1990s, SMER's malleability has been conditioned by the need to shield party cadres and external allies from the consequences of losing power. Over decades, the party has come to be dominated by a "cabal" of senior party politicians and external actors exhibiting all the signs of state capture. Politicians have thus traded protection to external "fixers" and oligarchs for material benefits. The whole extent of the captors' activities was revealed following an extensive report published on the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in February 2018. A substantial part of the public concluded that SMER party elites were morally responsible for the murder by instituting the system of "our people" (the nickname given to the cabal) with the pervasive feeling of impunity provided by such cover, which encouraged one of the fixers to mastermind the murder. The change of public mood cost party leader Robert Fico the prime ministership when the popular (and less tainted) Peter Pellegrini preemptively replaced him as party leader.

Fico, a former prime minister, launched a campaign to undermine the integrity of investigations of high-profile corruption cases that evolved around himself, his party peers and their allies in business and the state administration. Such campaigns were primarily based on challenging the investigations as biased, politically motivated and infringing on the rule of law. It also included accusations of foreign interference in Slovak politics and in the investigations themselves.

The radicalism of Fico's campaign increased in the aftermath of the February 2020 elections when the opposition alliance came to power on the back of electoral appeals for de-oligarchization, and ending systemic corruption and state capture—as symbolized by Fico's circle. This estranged the wing of the party around Peter Pellegrini, which split from SMER in 2020 to establish the party Voice–Social Democracy (HLAS). HLAS leaders could plausibly claim to have been outside the "our people" cabal and therefore felt less exposed to the consequences of the anti-corruption investigations. They objected to the anti-systemic shift in SMER's appeals, preferring to position themselves in the political centre and burnish their prospective governing credentials. HLAS quickly bested SMER in popularity ratings, and the breakaway soon took over a substantial part of the original organization. This only caused Fico to further radicalize his appeals, which have

increasingly come to rely on the mobilization of a part of the anti-systemic and "alternative geopolitics" electorates.

The role of the Russia–Ukraine war in the radicalization of Slovak politics

First, the actors primarily responsible for the overall radicalization of the political discourse and the ruling OĽaNO have been SMER, Republika and ĽSNS. As noted, ĽSNS and Republika are Radical Right outfits, and the reasons for their extreme conduct are both ideological and tactical. For the failing ĽSNS, radicalization is seen as a way to bring former voters who now prefer Republika back into the fold. This is effectively a fight over the ownership of the Radical Right issue space in Slovak politics. For Republika, a slight moderation might be an advisable strategy, but they still need to retain the anti-system but non-extremist voters inherited from ĽSNS. The two Radical Right parties' relationship with SMER is logical and paradoxical. In many respects, currently, they are tactical allies—particularly SMER and Republika. However, radicalized SMER represents a clear and present danger of poaching anti-systemic voters of Republika.

In the case of SMER, the reasons for the radical conduct are mainly tactical. Like ĽSNS, the party found itself bested by its splinter, HLAS. The polls, however, show that a significant part of HLAS's support still considers SMER as the alternative regarding their voting choice. While SMER fights for its former voters, the party also seeks to complement them with the radicalized anti-systemic voters from the two Radical Right parties. These efforts are incredibly intense as their motivation is the return to power and undoing any possible damages resulting from the high-profile corruption cases against SMER's cadres and allies. The strategy—characterized by an utter absence of inhibition combined with Fico's considerable political skills—has worked. SMER has become the second-most popular party in Slovakia, lagging behind HLAS by a margin of only 3–4 percentage points.

Secondly, the primary motivations of the radicalization efforts regard domestic politics. The issues of geopolitics, the relations with Russia and taking sides in the Russia–Ukraine war play an important but secondary role in attempts to mobilize anti-systemic voters to engineer a return to power and a purging of those who currently occupy the offices of state. In one way or another—and with varying degrees of intensity—all three parties claim that Slovakia's support for Ukraine in

the current effort to face Russia's aggression is against the national interest and threaten the country's welfare.

The outbreak of the war did not bring any substantial shifts in the popular support for political parties, including the Radical Right. The polls also confirmed that supporters of SMER and Republika were the most inclined to prefer Russia's victory in the conflict. Public opinion data collected in September 2022 by the polling organization Globsec suggest that 47% of Slovaks would prefer a Ukrainian victory as opposed to 19% who support Russia. This compares with 55% of Republika supporters backing Russia and 36% of SMES sympathizers. Of SMER's constituency, 34% responded that they did not care either way.

While all the parties surveyed here condemn Russia's act of aggression, this should not be read as a condemnation of the ideas behind the Kremlin's move. Open support of the Kremlin has certainly been rare and mainly limited to individuals on social media. Among the politicians, ĽSNS MP Slavěna Vorobelová, who replaced Marián Kotleba after he lost his parliamentary seat, said to the press that "she would not go and fight" if Russia invaded Slovakia because, among other things, the conflict was not between Russia and Slovakia but between the United States and Russia. Most of the time, political actors siding with Russia have opted for various indirect and proxy expressions of pro-Russian sentiment, such as the second part of Vorobelová's statement.

From among these, the most frequent were:

1. Praise of geopolitical realism and arguments regarding the legitimate spheres of influence of players like Russia. This included references to various Western experts in the international relations field (such as John Mearsheimer) who advance this line of thinking in an attempt to look competent in foreign policy.

2. Narratives shifting the responsibility for the war from Russia to Ukraine, the West, NATO and the United States. These included claims that Russia had a legitimate case for aggression or that it was provoked and manipulated to invade Ukraine by the West. The "proxy war" argument has also been used to assert that the conflict was between the United States and Russia and that Slovakia ought thus to stay out of the fray. All three parties in question referred to geopolitical realism in such a manner. Also, in January 2023, both MEPs elected on the ĽSNS ticket—one of them becoming, in the meantime, the leader of Republika—voted against the resolution of the

European Parliament calling for the establishment of the international tribunal dealing with Russia's war crimes in Ukraine.

3. Calls for ending the war and "unnecessary suffering". This narrative was a euphemism for stopping the military support to Ukraine—thus facilitating Ukraine's surrender and Russia's victory. For example, SMER's chair of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee criticized the Slovak mainstream political discourse as "having resigned on the language of peace and diplomatic solutions" and becoming "limited to hardening of the sanctions and supply of weapons to Ukraine". Similarly, SMER's chairman Robert Fico asserted that should his party become a part of the new government, "it would preclude a supply of a single cartridge to Ukraine" because such a policy would "only prolong the problem".

4. Related to this were arguments appealing to the economic interests of the country. These involved an open criticism of the Western sanctions targeting Russia. This was the official position of SMER and HLAS, who declared that the "solution of the impact of war required an active foreign policy emphasizing the enforcement of the national economic interests". On other occasions, SMER and the Radical Right linked the sanctions to higher energy prices, as shown, for example, by Republika's billboard campaign slogan, "We will rescind the sanctions and make energy cheaper".

All the arguments contributed to the overall narrative of the betrayal of the national interest perpetrated by the ruling majority: According to ĽSNS and Republika, the "government did it all to prolong the war and involve Slovakia in it", which was proof that the "government was serving foreign interests". In contrast, ĽSNS praised the "neutral position of Hungary in the conflict" as an example to follow. In a similar vein, according to Republika, "the government involved Slovakia in global issues while it was better to take the neutral position", described by the party as "a total failure to defend our sovereignty".

Conclusion

In the last couple of years, the political discourse in Slovakia has notably radicalized. The topic of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, however, has not been the main reason for such radicalization in general or regarding the populist Radical Right parties in particular. Instead, the main reason was the conflict over the political and

criminal consequences of investigating the high-profile corruption cases involving people linked to the previous government. However, the Russian aggression in Ukraine, to some degree, informed the radicalization process in the last year. Mostly, it has provided additional arguments for the "geopolitical" dimension of domestic political polarization. For SMER, ĽSNS and Republika, it has offered a means to distance themselves more convincingly from the post-2020 election majority. With the different motivations described above, SMER and the two Radical Right parties seek to enlarge and further encapsulate the estranged anti-systemic constituency and divide it among themselves. Their principal argument—taking the various forms described earlier—is that the current establishment's geopolitical orientation, as best illustrated in supporting Ukraine in the current war, presents a grave danger to the national interest of Slovakia—a betrayal similar to the anti-national activities taking place in the domestic arena.