

The initial response to the Russian-Ukrainian war in the political narrative of the European Union: The case study of the Slovak Republic

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Abstract: The present study aims to determine the peculiarities of the first (February–April 2022) response of the leaders of the leading Slovak parties to the start of the large-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. The research methodology involves a comparative analysis of the key Slovak parties' evolution (historical-comparative method), party statutes and programs, posts on social networks and official speeches of politicians (content analysis), and determination of the characteristic features of Slovak parties' ideologies based on their pro-European or pro-Russian orientations (comparative political studies). The study is topical as it considers the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war from the perspective of European (Slovak) politicians. It also analyses correlations between Euro-optimism and Russophilia/Euroscepticism in the wake of a large-scale Russian military aggression in Ukraine. The research findings ascertain that at the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February–April 2022, the influential political parties of the Slovak Republic separated into three groups, based on the following criteria: “supporting Ukraine – condemning Russia” (HLAS-SD, SaS, OĽaNO, “WE ARE FAMILY”, Progressive Slovakia, KDH, “Za Ľudí”), “neutrality – European Union criticism” (SMER-SD); “Russophilia – the war between the United States and Russia” (REPUBLIC, ĽSNS, SNS). The study found that there is a correlation between the party radicalization and the pro-Russian position, i.e. right-wing radical parties (Eurosceptics) support Russia; liberal or populist parties (mostly Euro-optimists or moderate Eurosceptics) are unanimous the European Union and support Ukraine. In their backing of Ukraine, Slovak political parties differ in providing humanitarian and military aid or speculating on the domestic economy deterioration due to the Ukrainian war.

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Introduction

In early 2022, the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war marked a change in the format of the current international relations system. After February 24, 2022, the world split into two camps, e.g. the democratic majority supporting Ukraine and providing humanitarian and military aid; and a minority displaying either neutrality or latent support for Russia. Indeed, the Russian-Ukrainian war context is traced in the political life and narrative of the European Union member states since the European Union was one of the first to support Ukrainians and the country and denounce Russia's military aggression. On the eve of the election campaigns, when political parties and their leaders start displaying their political preferences, the issue of the Russian-Ukrainian war is getting particularly critical. Hence, the EU countries' political subjects are attempting to mobilize the electorate based on their war attitudes maximally.

The Russian-Ukrainian war, unleashed on February 24, 2022, shook Slovakia. Moreover, the Slovak Republic was forced to make a statement on Russian military aggression in Ukraine, as its eastern territories border Ukraine. Beyond doubt, the Russian-Ukrainian war has aggravated another inherent confrontation in Slovak society – the struggle between Euro-optimists and Euro-pessimists. All these domestic and foreign events have divided the Slovak political environment. The electoral support of specific political parties can determine Slovaks' commitment to deepening European integration, their assessment of the efficiency of combating coronavirus, and their understanding of the need to join the world community by condemning Russian military aggression.

Material and methods

The Russian-Ukrainian war's impact on the system of international relations is presumably the most topical issue in the 2022 political narrative. Given the urgency of the events of the war, this theme was the focus of the thorough attention of international research organizations and journalistic investigations. Freedom House experts made the call to Ukraine the slogan of their empirical monitoring. The world democratic community is called upon to provide any assistance to Ukraine in confronting Russian aggression (Freedom House 2023). A year after the war, Chatham House experts sum up the interim

results of the war and outline seven reasons why the Russian-Ukrainian war altered the current system of international relations – from the total international isolation of Russia to a military and political victory for Ukraine (Bergsen et al. 2023). American centres, specifically the Council on Foreign Relations, also reiterate the implications of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The most pronounced global consequence of the war appeared to be the transition from a multipolar to a bipolar system of international relations (Abrams 2023).

The Slovak party configuration depends on how parties treat the most pressing political issues of March-April 2022 – March 2023. We will refer to this political issue as a “cleavage” in the Slovak party system. These are the notable political events that determine the groups of Slovak political parties. We base our analysis on two main cleavages¹: (a) the post-socialist complexities of Euro-Atlantic integration (the 1990s – early 2000s) and (b) the Russian-Ukrainian war context (February 24, 2022 – until present). In the context of the 2023 early parliamentary elections, the current Slovak political context poses new, and unfortunately customary for the entire Visegrad Four region, risks for the country (Walsch 2022), primarily the growing implication of populism and the political system’s authoritarianization risks.

The most current cleavage concerns the Russian-Ukrainian war. At the end of February 2022, Russia’s large-scale military aggression changed its global geopolitical position. A war of no analogues after World War II broke out in Europe. Russian propaganda has its view of the war, mobilizing its citizens and intensifying pro-Russian political forces in Europe (Korenyuk and Goodman 2022). In turn, the Western democratic world strongly condemns the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. It has assisted Ukraine, including introducing a broad package of sanctions (EU response 2022). The Slovak Government unequivocally supported the EU strategy to actively provide Ukraine with humanitarian and even military assistance (Hutko 2022). Moreover, these political forces succumb to narratives of Russian propaganda that portray the war in Ukraine as a conflict between the US and Russia.

¹ Using the term “cleavages”, we cannot but mention the founders of the concept and the classics of political sociology Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

In general, we can define the attitude of Slovak parties toward the Russian-Ukrainian war by the following criteria: “condemnation of Russia”, “neutrality” and “the war between the United States and Russia”.

Research and discussion

Among the most influential political parties in the modern Slovak Republic, we can identify about ten. Each of these has a different origin and level of political stability – from three decades to two years. The more important aspect is not the time in power but the current level of electoral support. As of early 2022, the young political party HLAS-SD² seems the most promising political force in the Slovak Republic. The founding of HLAS-SD resulted from a political crisis in Robert Fico’s government and the chance for Peter Pellegrini to pursue a successful political career. SMER-SD and HLAS-SD differ markedly, particularly in their attitude toward current foreign policy developments. Unlike his Social Democrat counterparts from SMER-SD, Peter Pellegrini condemns Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. He supports assisting, primarily humanitarian aid, to Ukraine, simultaneously taking care of the Slovak national interests. On the whole, Peter Pellegrini has not condemned Robert Fico’s pro-Russian stance, avoiding judgments (Pellegrini vyrazil 2022).

Interestingly, the Euro-orientations of the long-time Prime Minister Robert Fico’s SMER-SD³ party have been odd. Founded in 1999, the party later evolved as a leader in Slovak politics. Undoubtedly, the party has continually succeeded in the parliamentary elections since 2002 resulting in Fico’s several successive premierships (serving two full and one incomplete term) (Vláda Slovenskej republiky 2023). The Fico’s party dominance posed a threat of power usurpation, especially when they had the absolute majority in parliament (2012–2016), and the Slovak political format resembled the Hungarian (Victor Orbán’s authoritarianism and the FIDESZ’s dominance). As Marcel Martinkovič argues, the general crisis of liberal politicians and the high electoral support of authoritarian-type politicians ensured Robert Fico’s dominance in Slovak politics (Martinkovič 2016, 39). However, the deep political crisis following investigative journalist Ján Kuciak’s

² Slov.: *HLAS-sociálna demokracia* – VOICE-Social Democracy.

³ Slov.: *SMER-sociálna demokracia* – DIRECTION-Social Democracy.

assassination led to Robert Fico's resignation and his departure to the margins of Slovak politics (Fico se smíchem 2018).

Since its establishment, the SMER-SD has taken the stance of a social-democratic political force, so it vigorously supported Slovakia's course towards European integration. It looked to win the electorate that was in opposition to Eduard Heger's government during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in early 2022 was one of the reasons why Robert Fico encountered harsh criticism on the part of the European Union. Despite Fico's general support for humanitarian aid to Ukraine, he levelled criticism at the European Union structures for their passive stance in resolving the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict (Európska únia 2022). Consequently, Europe criticised Fico's reactionary approach and his party SMER-SD. Some MEPs from Slovakia⁴ have demanded that the European Social Democrats expel SMER-SD from their ideological camp in the European Parliament. From their perspective, the Slovak Social Democrats betrayed Social-Democratic ideas, cooperating with REPUBLIC, the Slovak neo-fascists, and articulating the position that contradicted the European Union regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war (Ficův SMER 2022).

The unspoken leader of every parliamentary election campaign has been SaS⁵. Since the 2010 elections, this party has delegated at least 11 members to Parliament. Moreover, in nearly every election, SaS has offered a political alternative to traditional Slovak parties. The party is universal, for its programme combines both liberal and conservative ideologies. The party's programme seeks to resolve inherent economic, industrial, educational, environmental and tax-related issues in the post-socialist country.

The attitude of the SaS leader toward Russia's waging war in Ukraine is unequivocally negative: he condemns the stance of the leading EU politicians regarding the Russian aggression (Slovenskí politici 2022). Richard Sulík's attitude toward the Russian-Ukrainian war is unanimous both as an influential party leader and the Minister of Economy in the Slovak Government. He argues that the economic consequences of the war will be even more severe than the crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, Slovakia must reduce

⁴ Mostly ruling populists from OĽaNO, Christian Democrats from KDH and Progressive Slovakia, a party close to President Zuzana Čaputová.

⁵ Slov.: *Sloboda a Solidarita* – Freedom and Solidarity.

energy dependence on Russia in the next five years (Sulík 2022). It should become the national security strategy of the Central European country.

The following is the party that was an unexpected success in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The overall success of OĽaNO⁶ would have been impossible without the well-chosen anti-corruption strategy of its leader Igor Matovič. At the same time, the further party crisis is related to COVID-19 or rather the story of the purchase of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V (Slovensko dovezlo 2021). Consequently, Igor Matovič had to resign as prime minister, although he retained leadership in the OĽaNO coalition (Matovič's successor is his party colleague Eduard Heger). In general, the party has won seats in parliament since the 2012 elections.

Ideologically, OĽaNO is a populist party, often speculating on the “universal values”, anti-corruption rhetoric and other blatant actions in the election campaign. The most demonstrative is a teacher from eastern Slovakia heading the pre-election list of candidates (Matovič povolal 2019). Thus, the party emphasized its closeness to the people and anti-corruption spirit. The party centres around its leader and undisputed manager Igor Matovič (in fact, it is a Matovič-made project). Igor Matovič was among the first Slovak politicians to immediately respond to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The politician condemned Russia's military actions and emphasised the need to maintain Ukraine's territorial integrity under international law (Slovenskí politici 2022). In the first days of the war, Igor Matovič volunteered at the Slovak-Ukrainian border, handing out toys to young children and promising certain social guarantees to adult Ukrainians (Kolesárová and Šnidl 2022). One can treat Igor Matovič's activities during the Russian-Ukrainian war differently, ranging from his desire to acquire political dividends to offering real aid during the war.

Another political party that identifies with its charismatic leader is Boris Kollár's “WE ARE FAMILY”⁷. As a rule, the one-party leadership rests on populism. As for its political orientation, the party is difficult to classify as left or openly right. It is closer to the political centre, but with a right-wing bias, since the party advocates traditional Slovak family values and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The party's 2020

⁶ Slov.: “*Obyčajní Ľudia a Nezávislé Osobnosti*” – “Ordinary People and Independent Personalities”.

⁷ Slov.: “*SME RODINA*” – “WE ARE FAMILY”.

slogan was “The 2020 programme of assistance to families” best reflects the ideological basis of the party⁸ (Program pomoci 2023).

On the first day of Russia’s military aggression, Boris Kollár instantly condemned the actions of the Russian authorities. Not only had the war, unleashed by Russia, grossly violated international law, but also it infringed upon the territorial integrity of one of Slovakia’s closest neighbours (Slovenskí politici 2022). Notably, the author of this statement was not only the leader of an influential political party but the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament.

Progressive Slovakia⁹ has represented the New Wave of influential political parties. The party emerged only in 2017, following the search for new faces in the Fico-dominated Slovak political environment of the late 2000s. Secondly, as a post-socialist country that has joined the European Union, Slovakia must constantly reprise its Europeanness. There must be a Eurooptimist party. Another peculiarity of the party was its proximity to the president, as the incumbent woman president was elected Deputy Chairman of Progressive Slovakia in 2018 (Progresívne Slovensko 2017).

For conservative Slovak voters, the party’s ideology is, to a great extent, liberal. The Western approach to the controversial issues that disturb Slovak society, such as LGBT rights, legalization of particular drugs, etc., makes the party progressive (Janíková 2019). Such progressive views will result in a confrontation with conservative and radical political forces. Progressive Slovakia has been operating as a pro-European party. In foreign policy, it prioritises deepening international and European cooperation (Stanovy 2017). Since the Russian-Ukrainian war began, Irena Bihariová, the party leader, has declared that Ukraine is also fighting for the sovereignty of the Slovak Republic. Moreover, she called for immediate provision of military assistance to Ukraine to effectively fight the Russian aggressor (Slovenskí politici 2022). In tandem with President Zuzana Čaputová, Progressive Slovakia lobbied for the provision of heavy weapons to the Ukrainian army and facilitated the reception of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, getting harsh criticism from the most conservative and pro-Russian political forces (Zuzana Čaputová 2022).

⁸ Slovak – “*Program pomoci rodinám 2020*”.

⁹ Slov.: “*Progresívne Slovensko*” – “Progressive Slovakia”.

The largest Eurosceptic force in the modern Slovak Republic with significant electoral potential is REPUBLIC¹⁰, which emerged in March 2021. It is not a new party but a team of experienced politicians founded by deputies of the National Council led by the odious Milan Uhrík. Some of its members have seats in the European Parliament. The party originated following some deputies' departure from the most popular right-wing radical party ĽSNS. Later they founded REPUBLIC (Odídenci z ĽSNS 2021). There was an apparent split between various influence groups within the ĽSNS against the background of Milan Uhrík's conflict with the longtime party leader Marian Kotleba. The leader of the newly formed party, Milan Uhrík, has been the most odious politician in Slovak politics. Being an MEP, Uhrík has repeatedly displayed populist and pro-Russian acts in European organizations (Daráková 2022).

During the Russian-Ukrainian war, their pro-Russian and anti-American position exacerbates the Euroscepticism of REPUBLIC. They claim NATO is a needless military organization. Slovakia should seek military neutrality, which suggests that the country should withdraw from NATO. On the contrary, they see Russia as one of the Slovak influential strategic partners, therefore any anti-Russian sanctions are inappropriate (REPUBLIKA 2023). REPUBLIC party regards the Russian-Ukrainian war as reactionary. The party leader has emphasised that, since late 2022, Ukraine has been a theatre of a war between the United States and Russia (Pochopenie 2022). Thus, Milan Uhrík succumbed to Russian propaganda.

KDH¹¹ is another traditionally Slovak party that has recently lost electoral support and failed to get into parliament for two consecutive election campaigns. The party was among the first to emerge in 1990 as an alternative to atheistic communist ideology. It is a classic example of a party which professes traditional values but proves that electoral success requires effective party rebranding.

Ideologically, the party is a classic conservative Christian Democratic party, claiming that the values of "European Christian culture" ensure Slovak national interests (Stanovy 2020). In general, the Slovak Christian Democrats displayed a positive attitude toward the Slovak Euro-Atlantic integration. During the 2002 and 2006 parliamentary convocations, they supported institutional reforms in

¹⁰ Slov.: *REPUBLIKA* – REPUBLIC.

¹¹ Slov.: *Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie* – Christian Democratic Movement.

Slovakia to join NATO and the European Union. For decades, KDH has demonstrated a pro-European stance, often emphasizing the dominant subsidiarity in the relations between member states and the EU (Zmušková 2021). In the Russian-Ukrainian war, KDH unequivocally supported Ukraine and provided large-scale assistance, such as humanitarian aid, military support or social support for Ukrainian refugees. Since the Russian-Ukrainian war started, KDH leader Milan Majerský has condemned Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. Importantly, the leader of the Christian Democrats alleged that to overcome this war, Europe needed a unified position (Slovenskí politici 2022).

Also, worth mentioning are the three parties that failed to get into parliament as of April 2022 but have long had a significant impact on the distribution of political forces in the Slovak Republic. Among the trio of parties with the largest electoral support is ĽSNS¹² – Slovakia's first radical right-wing party, dating back to 2000. Its odious leader Marian Kotleba has repeatedly expressed his anti-American and Eurosceptic stance (Neustupujte teroristom 2014). However, the party has been successful in the last two parliamentary elections. Finally, in April 2022, due to frequent power abuse by the party leader, ĽSNS had its registration revoked (Kotleba prišiel 2022). Another right-wing party, the SNS¹³, has operated since the beginning of political pluralism in Czechoslovakia in 1990. During its long history, the party has repeatedly got to the National Council but unexpectedly failed in the 2020 elections. The party's ideology is mostly nationally-conservative and Eurosceptic. Party leader Andrej Danko has repeatedly found himself in ambiguous situations, such as appropriating military ranks and faking degrees (Benedikovičová 2018). The third political force capable of scraping half of the required 5% is the centrist party "Za Ľudí"¹⁴, founded by former President Andrej Kiska, who ran as an independent candidate in the 2014 elections (Voľby a referenda 2023). The party is a liberal political force with a pro-European orientation.

Conclusion

One of the main political cleavages in the Slovak political and party system centre around the Russian-Ukrainian war (condemnation of

¹² Slov.: "*Ľudová strana naše Slovensko*" – "People's Party Our Slovakia".

¹³ Slov.: "*Slovenská národná strana*" – Slovak National Party.

¹⁴ Slov.: "*Za Ľudí*" – "For the People".

Russia's military aggression and accusations of the US). This cleavage forms different ideological groups in present-day Slovak politics. On the eve of the early parliamentary elections in September 2023 and 2024 "mega-elections" (presidential and "European"), political parties and individual political leaders will try to balance this cleavage to obtain the maximum level of electoral support. Interestingly, a discernible pattern has emerged: parties that focus on Euroscepticism, and the vast majority of right-wing political forces are pro-Russian. Those regard the Russian-Ukrainian war through the prism of the "USA vs. Russia" geopolitical confrontation. On the contrary, liberal-conservative or liberal political parties declare a pro-European policy, supporting the country's course to help Ukraine. We single out the political project of Robert Fico's SMER-SD, which accumulates a conservative electorate through criticism of the European Union and the country's pro-European Government. From these perspectives, the current (or potential) energy price increase is interpreted as the outcome of the "unneeded" Russian-Ukrainian war for Slovaks.

Importantly, the attitude of major Slovak parties toward the Russian-Ukrainian war is unanimous. Six political parties, mostly parliamentary, condemn Russia's military aggression in Ukraine and advocate assistance to Ukraine, up to military support. Robert Fico's SMER-SD party maintains a neutral position, condemning the European Union's indecisiveness in resolving the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. Among the cohort of parties that could overcome the electoral barrier (5%), only the REPUBLIC has supported the narratives of Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine being a war between the United States and Russia, thus opposing any assistance to Ukraine. One way or another, early 2023 elections to the National Council answered how much the "European" and "military" contexts shape the electoral behaviour of Slovak voters.

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