# Euroscepticism and the 'Missing Left': The Slovak Case Study

Karen Henderson*

**Abstract**

The nature of Euroscepticism in Slovakia has changed notably since 2014. Objections to the European Commission's refugee quotas that first occurred in 2015 have far more traction with voters than earlier Eurosceptic arguments, and less emphasis is now placed on the positive role of EU funds. The Visegrad Four states have collaborated closely in their responses to the refugee crisis, but the Slovak case study is particularly revealing because opposition to immigrants is led by an allegedly social democratic government that supports EU membership. It is questionable whether its securitisation of the refugee crisis and the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists is the result of Islamophobia or indicative of a general hostility to immigration that could be construed as representing a problematic form of Euroscepticism. These attitudes stem less from the rise of far-right and overtly Eurosceptic parties and more from the lack of a political left. The fact that left-wing value orientations are weak can be demonstrated by surveys of voter and party views in Slovakia. Revisiting the idea that the main axes of party competition differ in Central and Eastern Europe and in Western Europe, post-communist states may have the potential to disrupt the pact between the mainstream right and left which underpins the entire European integration project.

*Keywords: Slovakia; European Union; political parties; Euroscepticism*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper makes three interlocking arguments about the nature of Euroscepticism and party competition in Central and Eastern Europe. Slovakia is used as a case study although some points made apply to some degree to the other three Visegrad states (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland). The first is that Euroscepticism has changed perceptibly since 2014 and whereas earlier Eurosceptic rhetoric had little traction with the electorate, the more recent anti-immigration policies for the first time convince voters that their own politicians know

* Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Mlynské luhy 4, 821 05 Bratislava, Slovak Republic. Email: khenderson@netax.sk.

better than Brussels. The second is that Islamophobic responses to the recent refugee crisis may conceal a deeper antipathy to immigration *per se* which is incompatible with EU membership and therefore not merely Eurosceptic but inherently also a form of 'hard' Euroscepticism. The third is that the problematic response of post-communist states to the refugee crisis results from the 'missing left' of the party spectrum, whereby social democratic value orientations are largely absent even in parties that define themselves as left-wing on the basis of their economic policies. While it is hard to categorise this as a form of Euroscepticism, it has the potential to unbalance the European integration project at least as profoundly as the most extreme Eurosceptic views.

## 2. Euroscepticism in Slovakia

Much political science research on Euroscepticism attempts to create workable definitions that can be applied to all member states and sometimes also to candidate and potential candidate states. This notwithstanding, there is some evidence from both Slovakia and the Visegrad Four as a whole that suggests that their Euroscepticism may in fact be *sui generis*. The four countries' most prominent common stance has been adopting a negative position on issues connected to refugees and asylum seekers, and this is precisely because their political agendas are distinctly different from that of other member states, most particularly the old member states. Furthermore, while the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections caused consternation because of the growth of strongly Eurosceptic parties in, for example, France and the UK, but also to a lesser extent Germany, in the Visegrad states the shift towards Euroscepticism is significant because it affects policy stances of governing parties and to a lesser extent shifts in electoral choice (though Poland's October 2015 parliamentary election also demonstrates the latter). Illiberal attitudes among governing parties are clearly more dangerous than maverick stances by parties on the periphery of parliamentary politics.

Euroscepticism has tended to be rather weak in Slovakia, in part because of its troubled trajectory to EU accession, which left many Slovaks more interested in what the EU thought of their country than in what they thought of the EU. When the EU accession referendum took place in 2003, no parliamentary party opposed joining the EU, and the country produced the highest 'yes' vote ever produced in an accession referendum (Henderson 2004). With that, it looked as if Slovaks considered the EU issue resolved: a year later, they produced the lowest turnout ever in a European Parliament election – a record that they themselves broke 8 years later, with a stunning 13.05 per cent turnout (Gyárfášová 2015).

Euroscepticism was not entirely lacking in the first ten years of EU membership. The Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie – KDH) had some interest in justice and home affairs issues, underpinned by a concern that the EU could interfere in matters relating to abortion or registered partnership, and the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana – SNS) focused, rather erratically, on issues of sovereignty (Henderson 2006; Malová et al. 2005). In the 2012 parliamentary election SNS took a clear Eurosceptic position opposing membership (though it failed on that occasion to gain any

parliamentary seats). However, the dominant Slovak political discourse portrayed the EU as a source of funds, and extravagant electoral promises could escape the 'and how will you finance this?' question by pointing to structural funds (Haughton, Rybář 2008; Malová, Dolný 2016). This was not unreasonable: by 2016, estimates of the amount of public investment in Slovakia dependent on EU funds ranged from 75 to 86 per cent (European Commission 2014; European Commission 2016; Gabrižová 2016). However, it has been pointed out in other contexts that countries that join the EU primarily for economic reasons are more prone to Euroscepticism, and there is reason to doubt how robust pro-EU sentiment will prove to be in countries where the economic reasons for joining relate to the receipt of funds rather than to free trade.

In October 2011, international attention was drawn to Slovak Euroscepticism because the four-party centre-right government of Iveta Radičová was brought down when she linked a vote of confidence in her government to the ratification by parliament of the extended European Financial Stability Facility and lost. However, the vote was repeated with a different result shortly afterwards, as an early election had been called and the opposition Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-sociálna demokracia – Smer-SD), led by Robert Fico, no longer abstained. Only one government party – the economically liberal Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita – SaS) led by Richard Sulík – actually opposed the Greek bailout. SaS had first emerged in the 2009 European Parliament election with a heavily Eurosceptic programme challenging the European Commission's competence. Although the party's Euroscepticism (it openly opposed structural funds) had limited popular appeal, it did herald an increase in the questioning of EU policy across the political spectrum, with most parties criticizing the principle of bailing out what they considered economically irresponsible member states (Haughton 2014a). This was still noticeable in the 2014 European Parliament election programmes, and the feeling that the Greeks were richer than Slovaks and therefore should not be receiving help from them had some appeal to voters.

Generally, however, Slovakia continued to lack strongly Eurosceptic and nationalist parties. After the May 2014 elections, Smer-SD's four Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) belonged to the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S & D) group in the EP, while six MEPs from four different parties were in the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and three MEPs from three different parties joined the Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The latter included SaS's leader Richard Sulík, whose campaign affiliation had been with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), but he then found them too left-wing and far removed from the party's Eurosceptic concerns with the standardization of light bulbs and similar issues. SNS failed to gain any EP seats, but since the 2012 parliamentary election the Slovak nationalists had changed leadership and by the time they re-entered the Slovak parliament in 2016 their Euroscepticism had a softer tone. Although the image of the EU in Slovakia, as elsewhere in the Visegrad region and the EU as a whole, was damaged by the economic crisis (see table 1), most forms of Euroscepticism lacked traction with the Slovak electorate. Freedom of travel, EU funds and Eurozone membership were too clearly advantageous for most Slovaks.

**Table 1: Percentage of citizens with a very or fairly positive image of the European Union: 'In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?'**

| | EB63 May 05 | EB68 Nov 07 | EB73 May 10 | EB78 Nov 12 | EB82 Nov 14 | EB83 May 15 | EB84 Nov 15 | EB85 May 16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **EU 28 (27, 25)** | 47 | 49 | 42 | 30 | 39 | 41 | 37 | 34 |
| **Czech Republic** | 43 | 44 | 35 | 21 | 37 | 37 | 27 | 26 |
| **Hungary** | 43 | 41 | 42 | 29 | 40 | 43 | 39 | 33 |
| **Poland** | 51 | 64 | 53 | 40 | 61 | 53 | 55 | 47 |
| **Slovakia** | 46 | 50 | 50 | 28 | 39 | 38 | 35 | 30 |

*Source: Eurobarometer 2005: 15; 2008: 249; 2010: 192; 2012: T45; 2014: 7; 2015a: 9; 2015b: 7; 2016: 16.*

The first Eurosceptic cause that encountered widespread public support was that of refugee quotas, discussed below. Amid anti-immigration rhetoric, there was a strong strand of sovereignty-based Euroscepticism since the Slovak government's main argument in its confrontation with the EU was that Brussels had no right to determine who lived in their country. Slovakia's first major dispute with the EU marked a major shift in how Slovak parties portrayed the EU: by the time of the 2016 parliamentary election the discourse of the EU as a solution to resource issues was far less prominent than it had been. It appears no longer to have fitted the mood of the times. In addition, that election saw the far right Kotleba-People's Party Our Slovakia gain eight per cent of the vote and enter parliament (Rybář, Spáč 2017) with an openly racist programme that included holding a referendum on EU membership and leaving NATO (ĽS Naše Slovensko 2016).

## 3. Opposition to Immigration as a Source of Euroscepticism

On 19 August 2015, the Slovak Government hit the BBC news headlines by stating that it could only accept Syrian refugees who were Christians or atheists. The reason for this, an Interior Ministry official explained, was that there were no mosques in Slovakia and Muslims could not be integrated if they did not like it in Slovakia (BBC 2015). This argument was somewhat disingenuous since Culture Ministry regulations on the registration of religions, based on Slovak law (Zákon 308/1991Zb), did not recognize Islam.[1] Negative Slovak government attitudes to refugees had in fact been evident earlier, when the May 2015 European Agenda on Migration (European Commission 2015a) was accompanied by a European Commission proposal to spread 40,000 asylum seekers in Italy and Greece around other member states.

Slovakia's stance gained more negative publicity a month later. On 4 September 2015, the Visegrad Four states adopted a rather negative joint statement on 'migrants' – tacitly refusing to use the word 'refugee' (Visegrad Group 2015). A crucial meeting of EU interior ministers later in the month accepted quotas for the distribution of refugees (European Commission 2015b), but the Slovak prime minister said that he would refuse compulso-

ry quotas and would take the decision on quotas to the European Court of Justice. In a subsequent attempt o prove that Slovakia was being a good European partner, the prime minister and interior minister in October and November 2015 repeatedly emphasised their collaboration with neighbours in police and military action for protecting borders, pointing out that they had sent police officers who spoke English and Hungarian to assist Hungary in protecting its southern border. This point was also frequently emphasised by Prime Minister Robert Fico during Slovakia's EU presidency in the second half of 2016, when Slovakia introduced the concept of 'flexible' or 'effective' solidarity, which in practice would have allowed countries to refuse refugee distribution mechanisms if they contributed to alleviating the migration crisis in other ways (Visegrad Group 2016; Barigazzi 2016; Statewatch 2016).

The Slovak government's stance had hardened after the Paris attacks in November 2015. The morning after, Prime Minister Fico gave a televised press conference, accompanied by his defence minister, in which he repeated his argument that it was a security risk to let into Europe hundreds of thousands of 'people about whom we know nothing' (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2015), as if the events in Paris incontrovertibly proved he had been right. He said that both refugee camps and 'foreign communities' in Slovakia would be monitored, and stated, with reference to refugees as a whole, that 'to try and integrate someone in Slovakia who doesn't want to be integrated is nonsense', as if there were no Muslims who had successfully integrated into Slovak society. The following day, his stance had hardened further, and he stated that 'every single Muslim on Slovak territory' was being monitored, and that in the main they were there legally (TA3 2015). A day later (16 November), he defended this comment against protests from the Islamic Foundation in Slovakia and said that with the exception of the Breivik case in Norway 'it's practically always representatives of the Muslims when there are terrorist attacks' (RTVS 2015). Two days later, both the prime minister and the interior minister started to backtrack on condemning all Muslims, but only slightly.

The Slovak government's Islamophobic response to Paris was not alone in the Visegrad Four. In defending his immediate response to the attacks, Prime Minister Fico backed up his perception that Syrian refugees were a security threat by pointing out that since the previous Friday, the Polish government had said that it would reject quotas. He did not draw attention to the fact that a more nationalist right-wing government had just been elected in Poland, and was merely using Paris as an excuse to repudiate an undertaking of its predecessor that it had condemned at the time. The Hungarian government, which had for many years concerned the international community with its nationalist and authoritarian behaviour, responded to Paris as might have been expected, while the Czech Republic's President Miloš Zeman celebrated the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution on 17 November by attended an anti-Islamic rally (a move strongly criticised by the Czech prime minister).

The Slovak reaction to the refugee crisis and the blatant Islamophobia which accompanied it appears to be a successful case of securitization, whereby an issue is presented and widely accepted as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan et al. 1998: 24–25). Muslims were presented as a security threat, with virtually no attempt to distinguish between refugees, terrorists and Muslim citizens of EU member states. Three possible reasons can be suggested to explain why the Slovak government might have done this.

The first is that the refugees genuinely are a security threat to Slovakia, or were perceived as such by Slovak politicians and security advisers. There is little evidence to support this. Slovakia has been less affected by terrorism than most EU member states, and on a day-to-day basis there appears to be minimal awareness among the public of any terrorist threat. For example, bags are rarely checked when politicians are due to speak and citizens appear unconcerned by unattended luggage. Were security concerns behind the strong Slovak reaction to refugee quotas, it would be hard to explain why Slovakia in particular felt so threatened.

The second explanation, and the one most commonly advanced by analysts, is that Prime Minister Fico, with a parliamentary election due in March 2016, was looking for a way to bolster his popularity and remain in power. There is more evidence for this explanation: 'We are protecting Slovakia' was a major slogan on Smer-SD's election posters. Furthermore, when Smer-SD's foreign minister, Miroslav Lajčák, was interviewed by Tim Sebastian about Slovakia's EU presidency in July 2016, he replied to accusations that Fico's comments about Muslims constituted 'religious discrimination' by saying 'You should see these statements in the context of the electoral campaign' (Deutsche Welle). However, although it was expected that Fico's anti-Muslim rhetoric would ease following the election and his appointment as prime minister for a third time, in his first major interview after the election (and following a serious heart operation) his anti-Muslim rhetoric continued unabated, including the statement that 'there is no room for Islam in Slovakia' (Denník N. 2016). That interview was particularly badly timed, since it appeared on the day that Mr. Lajčák's candidacy as UN Secretary General was approved by the Slovak government.

The third explanation is the most problematic from the EU's point of view, and this is that most Slovaks do not accept immigration as a normal part of being a member state. Securitizing the refugee issue on the grounds that the refugees were mostly Muslim and some countries were suffering terrorist attacks by Muslims could possibly be construed as a (largely unsuccessful) attempt to persuade the rest of the EU that Slovakia had a logical reason for rejecting refugee quotas, other than a general distaste for accepting immigrants. Since the Slovak arguments appeared Islamophobic and discriminatory on the international stage, this attempt largely failed, although securitization was generally accepted domestically. Likewise, the blunt statement that multiculturalism has failed in Western Europe, which is widely accepted in Slovakia, is far more contentious elsewhere in the EU.

There is also some evidence to suggest that Slovakia may in fact be anti-immigrant rather than Islamophobic. Where it is an outlier in the EU is that in 2014 it had fewer immigrants per 1,000 inhabitants than any other EU member state (Eurostat 2016: figure 1), and received the smallest number of non-EU immigrants of any EU member state – less than 500 (Eurostat 2016: table 1). At the beginning of 2015, over 40 per cent of foreign citizens in Slovakia came from its three Visegrad neighbours and half of Slovakia's 'foreign-born' population hailed from the Czech Republic (Eurostat 2016: table 6). Since the earlier communist governments had also limited immigration and been very successful in preventing illegal immigration, Slovaks were unused to dealing with foreigners in their own country, though this does not explain why politicians attempt to exacerbate rather than allay any fears this may produce. More problematic, however, are attitudes to freedom of movement within the EU. Eurobarometer surveys repeatedly show that Slovaks claim to be extremely

positive about the right of EU citizens to live and work in every EU member state, and are above the EU average on this measure. However, when asked if they felt positive about immigration of people from other EU member states, the Slovak response was far lower than the EU average. Citizens from states such as the UK and Austria, who were in principle over 20 percentage points less likely to support the right of EU citizens to live and work in any member states, in practice felt more positive about the immigration of other EU citizens to their own countries than Slovaks did (Eurobarometer 2015c: T40, T45, T46; 2015d: T143, T148, T149; 2016b: T117, T120, T121). Taken together with Slovak Islamophobia, which would be likely to impede the freedom of movement of the millions of Muslim citizens of EU member states, it is unclear whether Slovak attitudes to immigration as a whole are compatible with EU membership.

If we look at commonly-cited definitions of Euroscepticism, then Szczerbiak and Taggart's notion of 'soft' Euroscepticism – 'where there is NOT a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that 'national interest' is currently at odds with the EU trajectory' –appears applicable to the Slovak attitude towards EU refugee policy. The Slovak government has repeatedly suggested that quotas for asylum seekers are rejected on grounds of national interest, which would indicate that it is a form of soft Euroscepticism. If we look, however, at the definition of 'hard' Euroscepticism, this includes not only 'principled opposition to the EU and European integration' which 'can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership', but also parties 'whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived' (Szczerbiak, Taggart 2003: 6). Non-discrimination is such a fundamental principle of the European integration project, enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (European Union 2016), that it might reasonably be argued that Slovak Islamophobia, the general contention that the population is unable to absorb those with different traditions, and the Visegrad Four's open hostility to asylum seekers on the grounds of their otherness are in fact a form of hard rather than soft Euroscepticism, with the attendant dangers that this poses.

The idea that Slovakia or the Smer-SD party promotes hard Euroscepticism is to some extent counter-intuitive. During Mr. Fico's second term as prime minister, the country promoted itself as a 'core' EU member state (Malová, Dolný 2016), and when his third government held the EU presidency in the second half of 2016, its presidency website also emphasised that 'we have joined the core of European integration' (Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU 2016). In addition, the 'hard Eurosceptic' label clearly applies better to Kotleba's party, with its explicit hostility to EU membership, than it does to Smer-SD, which had overseen Slovakia's accession both to the Schengen Zone in 2007 and the Eurozone in 2009.

However, it is not unknown in Slovakia for a party to declare enthusiasm for EU membership while behaving in a way that is inconsistent with it. The second half of the 1990s was dominated by the problematic policies of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, who submitted Slovakia's EU membership application in June 1995 while behaving domestically in a way that led to a negative European Commission opinion on Slovakia's application in July 1997 (Fisher 2006; Henderson 1999; Samson 2001); and throughout the period Mečiar's

Movement for a Democratic Slovakia spent in opposition (from 1998–2006), it strove to prove its pro-European credentials, eventually joining the ALDE-European Democrats group in the European Parliament in 2009, while pursuing nationalist agendas at home. In the 2002 parliamentary election campaign, the party claimed loudly that its return to government would not prevent Slovakia being invited to join the EU and NATO, while politicians from both stated the opposite (Haughton 2003; Haughton, Fisher 2008). It is notable that Robert Fico's Smer-SD also formed its first government coalition together with both Mečiar and the Slovak National Party. The latter is a coalition partner in the third Fico government (formed in March 2016), and was also a coalition partner in the third Mečiar government from 1994–1998, when Slovak-EU relations were most problematic (Deegan-Krause 2006).

Applying conventional terminology about Euroscepticism to Slovakia may, therefore, be no easier now than it was twenty years ago. Malová and Dolný (2016: 10) state that Slovakia's political elite 'mostly broke with humanitarian European norms' in the case of the refugee crisis and suggest that 'this indicates a superficial and instrumental understanding of European rules and norms that in turn, may decrease support for the EU project and undermine quality of democracy'. The Slovak president, Andrej Kiska, has also questioned Robert Fico's understanding of Slovakia's position as a core state in the EU. At the Slovak Foreign Ministry's Annual Conference in March 2017, the prime minister emphasised again that Slovakia's priority should be belonging to the core of European affairs (Tablet.tv 2017), while the president pointed out that this was not merely a technical matter, and that Slovakia had to speak 'one language' in discussions with European partners and with the public at home (Office of the President 2017). Inconsistency in stances adopted inevitably makes systematic categorisation of political positions difficult.

## 4. The Missing Left

It might appear that the picture being presented of Slovakia, and the Visegrad Four as a whole, is a sadly familiar one throughout the European Union: crises – whether relating to the Eurozone or refugees – lead to uncomfortable victories for parties of the extreme right. To an extent this may apply to Viktor Orbán's one-party FIDESZ government in Hungary, and the one-party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) government elected in Poland in autumn 2015, though it should be noted that FIDESZ is, controversially, a member of the European People's Party in the European Parliament, while PiS is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists, so neither would normally be labelled far right. Robert Fico, however, leads the Smer-Social Democracy party, which identifies itself as belonging to the left. It has admittedly always been a somewhat controversial member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), which is the main component of the S & D group. There was controversy after Smer-SD formed a coalition with the xenophobic right Slovak National Party in 2006 (Holmes, Lightfoot 2011), and there was a second attempt to suspend its membership after the Slovak government's rejection of refugee quotas. A PES presidium meeting in October 2015 allowed its membership to stand (Smer-SD 2015), but there was

further concern about the prime minister's Islamophobia at the beginning of Slovakia's EU presidency (PES 2016).

The third argument that is being made in this paper, therefore, is that when we look at the Visegrad Four countries and the EU, the emergence of the far right and the far left on to the political stage in response to the Eurozone and refugee crises is not the major issue. A far more serious problem is the 'missing left'. If we want to explain the lack of solidarity shown by the Visegrad Four states towards Syrian refugees, the most obvious reason is that they have almost no left when it comes to value orientations towards issues such as solidarity, cosmopolitanism, anti-discrimination and acceptance of otherness. Moreover, over the last two decades more moderate parties have been 'hollowed out', to be replaced by large parties with authoritarian and nationalist tendencies.

Arguably, the 'missing left' in Central and Eastern Europe is far more serious for the future of the EU than has been presaged by the policy clashes over refugee quotas. It could be argued that the region's political constellation fundamentally undermines the entire basis of the European integration project as an agreement between the mainstream right and the mainstream left which constructively synthesises policy goals that are important for each of them.

One of the earliest suggestions that 'left' and 'right' could mean different things in Central and Eastern Europe and in Western Europe came in Herbert Kitschelt's 1992 article 'The Formation of Party Systems in East Central Europe', in which he suggested that 'the dynamic of the postcommunist party systems stands in direct contradistinction to patterns of competition in advanced capitalist democracies' (Kitschelt 1992: 17).

> (…) it is to be expected that the *defenders of the status quo* in economic distribution will oppose a libertarian-cosmopolitan opening of democratic decision procedures and citizenship entitlements because such measures are likely to entail incalculable changes in the future distribution of resources. In other words, where the status quo is predominantly a *nonmarket regime of economic allocation,* status quo advocates, as opponents of the market system, will be authoritarian and particularist. Conversely, if the status quo is a market regime, proponents of the market system will be authoritarian and particularist. (Kitschelt 1992: 16)

The expectation from this is that 'Unlike in West European party systems, all East European party systems will be centred around a promarket/libertarian versus antimarket/authoritarian axis', whereby in contrast 'West European party systems in the late twentieth century tend to be oriented toward an antimarket/libertarian versus promarket/authoritarian axis' (Kitschelt 1992: 20). The essential argument here is that in Western Europe the economic left is linked to liberal, cosmopolitan social values while the economic right is more conservative and authoritarian. In post-communist societies, the opposite is true: former communists are conservative, authoritarian and nationalist, while the pro-market reformers are also more liberal and cosmopolitan in their social attitudes.

Even in the 1990s, the argument was not an exact fit for the post-communist world. Social democrats and reformed communists in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were frequently more liberal than opponents who were on the right economically (Kitschelt et al.

1999). As the decade advanced and Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia appeared to be creating 'illiberal democracies' and falling behind in the race for EU accession (Vachudova 2005), it was suggested that the presence of ethnic minorities in these countries might be one reason for the different political trajectories, and the reason why former communists had reverted to nationalism to underpin their power (Vachudova, Snyder 1996). More recently, it has been suggested that legacies of the exit from communist federations may also be important (Rovny 2014).

However, what will be suggested here is that, far from the idiosyncrasies of party competition in the region lessening as a market economy and EU membership become the status quo, the difference between the directions of the main axis of party competition in Western and in Central and Eastern Europe has solidified.[2] In Poland and in Hungary, shifts have occurred because the established post-communist parties of the left, the Democratic Left Alliance in Poland and the Hungarian Socialist Party, have declined markedly (Bakke, Sitter 2013), to the point where the left coalition failed to enter the Polish parliament at all in October 2015 (Szczerbiak 2015). In the Czech Republic, the social democratic Czech prime minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, has remained one of the only leading politicians in the Visegrad states willing to speak out against xenophobia and populism, but even there, by 2015 his party appeared to have been overtaken in opinion polls by a more populist coalition partner.

Expert surveys conducted from the time that the 2004 EU enlargement was imminent also show that the direction of the main axis of party competition in Central and Eastern Europe is clearly still not what would be expected in Western Europe. The Chapel Hill surveys conducted in Central and Eastern Europe as well as Western Europe since 2002 differentiate a left-right economic axis and a TAN (Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) and GAL (Green-Alternative-Liberal) axis, and all post-communist case studies to some extent find higher scores for GAL values on the economic right of the party spectrum (Vachudova, Hooghe 2009; Marks et al. 2006).

Before using Slovakia as a case study to show that the left is missing, we first have to address the problem of measurement in a situation in which we cannot be sure what the terms 'left' and 'right' mean when used in both everyday conversation and in academic analysis. Apart from the fact that both may be applied either to views on economic policy or to other value orientations, tracking the profile of political parties is hard because it can be measured in a number of different ways:

- The left/right self-definition of voters according to party preferences as stated in public opinion polls.
- The left/right profile of voters according to the answers they provide to specific questions about their economic and social views as stated in public opinion polls.
- Parties' self-definition as left or right, including membership of international party organisations or EP groups.
- Declared policy aims as laid out in party election manifestos.
- Analysis of specific policies pursued or supported by parties when in government or opposition, or policies promoted, as established by expert surveys.

In the Slovak case, as will be seen, parties' and voters' self-definition on the left-right scale is at best accurate regarding their economic views, but rather different from a western

understanding of left and right when it comes to views on social issues and value orientation. It initially appeared that more liberal views were most strongly represented by the centre-right parties, who were largely responsible for Slovakia's improved position regarding the EU under the two governments of Mikuláš Dzurinda from 1998 to 2006 (Haughton 2014b; Haughton, Rybář 2009). However, when it comes to views on issues such as registered partnership and welcoming refugees, it is more accurate to say that the left is, quite simply, absent, or at least nearly absent.

When it comes to self-definitions, Slovak parties and voters appear to have a fairly clear view of the division between right and left in the Slovak political spectrum. Table 2 includes all eight parties that obtained EP seats in May 2014 as well as SNS, which gained seats in the March 2016 parliamentary election. A first glance at the table suggests that Slovakia is indeed a very right-wing country, since only two parties – Smer-SD and the nationalist SNS – have supporters who self-identify as left. However, whereas Smer-SD is in the left-wing S & D grouping in the EP, the nationalists were part of the Eurosceptic/right Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) when they sat in the European Parliament. As mentioned already, an extraordinary four Slovak parties are in the European People's Party, and the Network (Sieť) party founded in June 2014 might have joined this group were it to survive long enough to do so. An equally baffling three parties are affiliated to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

**Table 2: Voters' and parties' left-right self-identification**

| Voters' preferred party | 2010 | 2012 | 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party, SDKÚ-DS (EPP) | 6.80 | 7.24 | 7.49 |
| Freedom and Solidarity, SaS (ECR – ex ALDE) | 6.66 | 6.58 | 7.15 |
| NOVA (ECR) | – | – | 7.07 |
| Christian Democratic Movement, KDH (EPP) | 6.79 | 6.26 | 6.94 |
| Party of the Hungarian Coalition, SMK (EPP) | – | – | 6.66 |
| Bridge, Most-Híd (EPP) | 6.98 | 6.66 | 6.58 |
| Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, OĽaNO (ECR) | – | 5.59 | 6.13 |
| Average for all voters | 5.13 | 4.93 | 4.58 |
| Slovak National Party, SNS (ex-EFD) | 3.77 | 4.94 | 4.28 |
| Direction Social-Democracy, Smer-SD (S&D) | 3.60 | 3.34 | 2.5 |

Note: Self-identification on a 0–10 left-right scale where 0 was left and 10 right.

*Sources: CSES Slovensko 2010; SÚ SAV/Institute for Public Affairs, June 2012; EES 2014; Gyárfášová, Henderson (2015).*[3]

However, Slovakia appears less right-wing when one considers the size of the support of the parties in this table. As can be seen from the results of the March 2016 parliamentary election (table 3), Smer-SD gained over 28 per cent of the vote, and had obtained over 40 per cent of the vote in the previous parliamentary election, where SNS failed to enter parliament. (Of the two parties that unexpectedly entered the parliament in 2016, Kotleba's party is extreme right, and Boris Kollár's party is also right-wing and anti-immigration, though their economic policies are hard to define).

| Table 3: 5 March 2016 Slovak parliamentary election | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Party** | **% votes** | **seats** | **votes** |
| Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) | 28.28 | 49 | 737,481 |
| Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) | 12.10 | 21 | 315,558 |
| Ordinary People (OĽaNO-Nova) | 11.02 | 19 | 287,611 |
| Slovak National Party (SNS) | 8.64 | 15 | 225,386 |
| Kotleba – People's Party-Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) | 8.04 | 14 | 209,779 |
| We are the Family – Boris Kollár | 6.62 | 11 | 172,860 |
| Bridge (Most-Híd) | 6.50 | 11 | 169,593 |
| Network (Sieť) | 5.60 | 10 | 146,205 |
| Others (15), including: | 13.16 | 0 | 343,277 |
| Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) | 4.94 | 0 | 128,908 |
| Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK) | 4.04 | 0 | 105,495 |
| Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) | 0.26 | 0 | 6,938 |
| Total | 100.00 | 150 | 2,607,750 |
| *Source: Calculated from Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2016).* | | | |

The picture of Slovakia becomes more complex, however, when Slovaks are asked about their views on issues that test whether they are left or right on both economic questions and questions relating to social liberalism. Here it becomes clear that they generally understand 'left' to refer only to economically left-wing stances. Some of the questions used in the 2014 European Election Survey, which looked at both economic views and value orientations, are shown in table 4.

| Table 4: Public attitudes on economic and social issues, responses on a scale of 0 to 10 | |
|---|---|
| | **Mean (general public)** |
| 1. State regulation (0 = you are fully in favour of state intervention in the economy) | 4.65 |
| 2. Redistribution of wealth (0 = You are fully in favour of the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor) | 3.91 |
| 3. Same sex marriage (0 = You are fully in favour of same-sex marriage) | 7.25 |
| 4. EU integration (0 = EU should have more authority over the EU Member States' economic and budgetary policies) | 6.91 |
| *Sources: European Election Survey summer 2014; Gyárfášová, Henderson 2015.* | |

When responses to the questions are differentiated according to party preferences of respondents (table 5), links between voters' self-definition as left or right and party support can be seen when looking at most of the economic issues. However, on a social issue such as same-sex partnership the supposedly social democratic Smer-SD supporters are less tolerant than supporters of the parties whose voters appear to be on the right on economic issues and who self-identify themselves as being on the right. The nationalist SNS voters, while leftist on economic issues, take on a predictable far-right profile on both same-sex marriage and EU integration.

| Table 5: Public attitudes according to party preferences | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1. State regulation | 2. Redistribution of wealth | 4. Same-sex partnership | 7. EU integration |
| SDKÚ-DS | 5.53 | 5.06 | 7.07 | 6.70 |
| SaS | 6.40 | 5.13 | 5.57 | 6.99 |
| NOVA | 4.34 | 5.95 | 5.94 | 6.43 |
| KDH | 4.29 | 3.34 | 9.01 | 6.82 |
| SMK | 5.45 | 4.20 | 7.06 | 6.64 |
| Most-Híd | 3.90 | 4.02 | 7.81 | 5.08 |
| OĽaNO | 5.27 | 4.11 | 6.51 | 6.83 |
| SNS | 3.20 | 4.11 | 8.38 | 7.83 |
| Smer-SD | 4.02 | 3.42 | 7.83 | 6.91 |
| *Sources: EES 2014; Gyárfášová, Henderson (2015).* | | | | |

The finding that voters of Smer-Social Democracy are not left-liberal in terms of their value orientation is one that had already emerged in the surveys conducted at the time of the 2010 and 2012 parliamentary elections (Bútorová, Gyárfášová 2011; Bútorová et al. 2012). Very similar findings on the 'missing left' also emerge from a rather different survey into 'The Moral Foundations of the Political Views of Slovak Voters', which was conducted with 1051 Slovak respondents by the Focus agency in May 2015 as part of the project 'Extremist Breakthrough in Low Turnout Elections: A Lasting Momentum'. The project was based on US research on the moral foundations of politics, which examined how respondents reacted to questions that tested values on the dimensions care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation (Haidt 2012). In the Slovak survey, respondents were also asked to self-identify themselves as right-left and conservative-liberal. Some of the findings were by West European standards abnormal: for example, the more respondents rejected immigration, the more likely they were to identify themselves as liberals, while the more they rejected gender equality, the more likely they were to identify themselves as being on the left (Findor et al. 2016; Čikovský, Hruška 2015). Stances similar to those revealed by US research were more often present among those who considered themselves right or conservatives; it was among those who identified as left and liberal that Slovak results were confusing, again signalling elements of a 'missing left'.

When it comes to political parties, expert surveys also show that traditional left-wing value orientations are not widespread in Slovakia, and that Smer-SD is not a left-wing party in the normal West European sense of the term. This finding emerged in the EUVOX (2014), an EU-wide voting advice application (VAA) for the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, as well as in the 2014 Chapel Hill Survey mentioned earlier (Bakker et al. 2015). The Chapel Hill surveys use a battery of questions to identify parties on a left/right economic scale and also a GAL/TAN (green-alternative-libertarian/traditional-authoritarian-nationalist) scale. On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing the most libertarian stance, all Slovak parties except the self-styled liberal 'Freedom and Solidarity' have a score below 5, and with a score of 6.9, Smer-SD was judged by the experts to be less libertarian socially than two of the Slovak parties belonging to the EPP.

However, it could be argued that the lack of any left-wing Slovak party whose voters embrace both economically left-wing views and progressive, liberal social attitudes of the kind that often go together in Western Europe does not necessarily prove that Slovakia completely lacks liberal left-wing voters: these voters could be currently unable to find a party that corresponds to all their preferences, and therefore be spreading their vote between parties that are *either* economically left *or* socially liberal. As new Slovak parties are experiencing notable electoral success, there is indeed some speculation that there is space for a new liberal-left party to gain representation in parliament However, data from public opinion surveying at the time of the 2016 elections does not suggest that this group of voters is particularly large. As table 6 shows, less than four per cent of voters identified themselves as both left *and* liberal, while nearly three times as many voters identified themselves as left-wing conservatives, and a similar number thought they were right-wing liberals.

**Table 6: Self-identification of Slovak voters as economic left/right and liberal/conservative**

| | | Liberal | Centre | Conservative | Don't know | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Left** | % of total | 3.7 | 4.6 | 10.1 | 1.4 | 19.8 |
| | % of left | 18.9 | 23.2 | 50.9 | 7.0 | 100.0 |
| **Centre** | % of total | 6.6 | 9.5 | 9.5 | 20.0 | 27.6 |
| | % of centre | 24.0 | 34.4 | 34.4 | 7.3 | 100.0 |
| **Right** | % of total | 10.3 | 6.1 | 11.0 | 1.0 | 28.4 |
| | % of right | 36.1 | 21.4 | 38.8 | 3.7 | 100.0 |
| **Don't know** | % of total | 4.6 | 3.0 | 5.7 | 10.9 | 24.2 |
| | % of don't knows | 19.1 | 12.6 | 23.4 | 45.0 | 100.0 |
| **Total** | | 25.2 | 23.2 | 36.3 | 15.3 | 100.0 |

*Source: CSES and ISSP Slovakia 2016; Gyárfášová 2017.*

In considering the potential for the missing left gap to be filled in Slovakia, two factors need to be considered. The first is that the term left is still to an extent discredited from the communist period, so that voters who describe themselves as centre could potentially vote for a left-liberal party. Comparisons between election surveys conducted in Slovakia in 2012 and 2016 also suggest that the number of voters who either identify themselves as centrist or do not know how to place themselves on a left-right scale increased substantially over a four-year period (Gyárfášová 2017). However, this consideration is counter-balanced by the fact that, as discussed above when looking at the link between rejecting immigration and self-identifying as liberal, it is possible that Slovak voters do not understand the term liberal in the same way that West European political scientists do any more than they understand the term left to mean the same as in Western Europe.

## 5. Why the Missing Left Matters to the EU

When looking at the recent refugee crisis, the missing left appears to matter to the EU as it can be held responsible for the problematic attitudes of the Visegrad Four. The Czech Republic, where the social democratic prime minister has somewhat more of a traditional left-wing profile than his Slovak counterpart, is the only one of the four states that has not associated itself with Slovakia's European Court of Justice complaint about refugee quotas (European Council 2016). With fears that the refugee crisis may prove to be as problematic for the future of the EU as the Eurozone crisis, this does indeed seem to be a threat. However, it can also be suggested that the missing left in the new member states of the EU has the potential to be even more destabilising and that the refugee crisis might merely be the first clear manifestation of more deeply-rooted problems linked to integrating post-communist Europe. There are two dimensions to the problem.

The first relates to support for the EU in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Whitefield and Rohrschneider (2015) stated that 'there is good evidence that the European question is less crosscutting in CEE states than is the case in Western Europe, and that in post-Communist politics there (still) exists a uni-dimensional political landscape in which pro-market/pro-democracy, and pro-Europe positions are pitted against anti-market/anti-democratic, and anti-European stances'. If we return to the earlier arguments about the main axes of party competition, what we see is that the European integration project – which is, put crudely, free (single European) market for the mainstream right plus libertarian-cosmopolitan politics (and some transnational redistribution of wealth via cohesion policy) for the mainstream left – is a bargain between the mainstream right and left in Western Europe. In new member states, however, it privileges one end of the main axis of party competition: pro-market reformers, who are also more liberal in terms of issues such as transparency and social freedoms. During the accession period, this was not particularly problematic, since the nationalist post-communist left 'bought in' to the EU integration project once the reformist right had won the argument by defining EU integration as the fulfilment of national interest – a phenomenon most clearly apparent in Slovakia (Henderson 2006).

However, the aspirations of both 'left' and 'right' in CEE were subtly different from those of older member states when it came to European integration. Arguably, the CEE agenda was more inward-looking than in earlier enlargement waves (with the possible exception of the enlargement to the three southern European states in the 1980s). When looking at the main axis of party competition in CEE countries, the pro-EU reformist right stance which wants market reform plus more liberal attitudes on other political issues appears to coincide well with the famous 'Copenhagen criteria':

> The first, political, Copenhagen criterion demands precisely those liberatarian attitudes which ensure human rights and protection of minorities and counter the conservative and authoritarian assumption of social homogeneity. The second, economic, Copenhagen criterion emphasizes the need to accelerate reform of old communist structures that do not respond to the market and the need for competition… What is important here is that the EU makes demands of candidate states which coincide with the aims of parties at the

> 'pro-market/libertarian' end of the axis around which Kitschelt predicted that East European party systems would centre. (Henderson 2001: 10)

The difficulty post-accession is that while the Copenhagen criteria coincided well with the reformist agenda in the accession phase, they are rather more inward-looking than the leftist and rightist agendas upon which the 'European bargain' between mainstream left and mainstream right is founded. They lack the perspective that European integration is *per se* positive. The CEE economic agenda is one of post-communist transition, and after accession it became an agenda whereby all problems can be solved with EU funds; it does not relate to the economic advantages of a single European market which attracted the British and Danes, and later the Swedes and the Finns, to join the EU. The CEE political agenda, again, is one of overcoming the restrictive elements of communist rule and the disabling of individual rights which it entailed. It is does not relate to the Franco-German vision of peace in Europe which underlay the launch of the European Community, or a commitment to principles of transnational non-discrimination.

While this may present a problem for the EU, the second dimension to the problem of integrating post-communist Europe may long term prove even more destabilizing. As highlighted earlier, in the European Parliament, Slovakia has four parties in the EPP and three parties in the ECR, while three further parties present in the national parliament belong to the right or far right. One (admittedly large) party is a member of S & D, but has more than once faced possible ejection from the group because of its alien value orientation. No parties belong to the liberal, green or united left groups.

A glance at EP election results before and after the eastern enlargement shows a strengthening of the right of centre parties compared to the period before 2004, even if we disregard the fact that some CEE parties included in the socialist and liberal groups may be more traditional, authoritarian and nationalist than their West European counterparts. Although the 2014 European Parliament elections left the two largest parties of the mainstream right and left, the EPP and S & D (with a majority when they act together), the liberal ALDE was no longer in its accustomed third place, having been ousted by the Eurosceptic ECR. At the time of writing, the Visegrad Four states alone account for 24 of the 74 ECR MEPs, and only a quarter of their MEPs belong to the left or liberal party groups in the EP, as opposed to nearly a half of MEPs as a whole. While this is not such a noticeable pattern among post-communist states as a whole, there is nonetheless the potential for the traditional European integration bargain between the mainstream right and the mainstream left to break down. This is exacerbated by the fact that by late 2015, both Poland and Hungary were ruled by right-wing parties whose illiberalism increasingly brought them into conflict with the European Union.

The 'missing left' and the decline of liberalism in the Visegrad Four comes at a particularly difficult time. The Eurozone crisis which so notably tarnished the image of the EU was quickly followed by the refugee crisis and the EU may also face tough budget renegotiations if a 'hard Brexit' removes the UK's contribution to EU funds. The general lack of solidarity hitherto shown by the new member states in crisis situations suggests that this will be a major challenge. Underlying features of their party systems that alienate the left in older member states could be as damaging to the future of the EU as the rise of overtly Eurosceptic political parties.

## Footnotes:

1. In 2017, conditions for registering religions were actually tightened, when the Slovak parliament overrode a presidential veto to increase the number of signatures from members required for registration from 20,000 to 50,000. All have to be Slovak citizens resident in Slovakia.
2. It may also be argued that political dealignment is occurring in west European party systems, but this is a complex subject that cannot be addressed within the scope of this article.
3. My thanks to Oľga Gyárfášová, who provided the data and prepared this table and tables 4 and 5 for Gyárfášová, Henderson (2015), and also provided the data for table 6.

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