Amending the Slovak Parliamentary Rules of Procedure: Effective Changes or the Government's Weapon against the Opposition?

Katarína Chovancová*

Abstract

Parliament is considered one of the most important institutions in representative democracies. However, Rules of Procedure as institutional regulation of its activity have been rarely analysed. This paper aims to fill this gap by conducting an analysis of amending the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak legislature in the period 1998–2016, almost its entire existence. The analysis not only covers passed amendments but also looks at proposed but unpassed ones. The main assumption is that through changing the parliamentary rules, the parliament adapts itself to specific trends. These are identified in the paper, as well as the main categories the proposed amendments concentrated on, distinguishing between redistributive and effective amendments. One of the key findings of the paper is that it is not the government that dominates the process of proposing amendments to the parliamentary rules. On the other hand, when we look at passed amendments only, the government is, then, the dominant actor. The assumption that the amendments of the Rules of Procedure are primarily of a redistributive character was not verified. Despite the fact that amending these rules may be used by the governmental majority to redistribute the power in the Slovak parliament, in practise, such behaviour is rather infrequent and cannot be described as the government's weapon against the opposition.

Keywords: Slovakia; parliament; institutions; Rules of Procedure; government; opposition

DOI: 10.5817/PC2018-3-185

1. Introduction

Parliament is considered one of the most important institutions in representative democracies. Moreover, as Sieberer and Müller (2015: 998) declare, 'an extensive literature shows

* Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno, e-mail: katarina.chovancova@mail.muni.cz.

that parliamentary rules have important effects on political processes and outcomes and thus ultimately on the democratic governance'. Rational Choice Institutionalism stresses the potential of using changes in parliamentary standing orders to redistribute power among political actors in legislatures, as it is the only way to institutionally influence relations among parliamentary actors. However, Rules of Procedure as institutional regulation of a parliament's activity is rarely analysed in political science. In fact, this is the main motivation for conducting an analysis of these rules and changes in them, since there is undoubtedly a gap in such research, although its importance has been repeatedly stressed by number of authors. Whilst such analysis exists in case of several old democracies, no similar paper has been written on the subject of institutional changes of the parliamentary rules of procedure in new, post-communist democracies in Central Eastern Europe. Thus, this paper provides the very first analysis of proposed changes to the Act on the Rules of Procedure of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and, more importantly, of all passed amendments of this law proposed in period from 2002 to 2016.

The analysis of these amendments is based on the main assumption that amending the parliamentary rules may be understood as the process of institutional adaptation of the legislature to internal or external issues, challenges and trends. Thus, subjects of such adaptation will be identified and put into wider context. Moreover, and more importantly, there are two main aims of amending these rules which might be identified: According to Tsebelis (1990), we may distinguish between *redistributive* and *effective* changes of the Rules of Procedure. Effective changes are, from the long-term perspective, effective for all involved actors and they usually make parliamentary action and outputs better, especially in the context of their efficiency. Redistributive changes, on the other hand, usually redistribute the relative strength among the parliamentary actors, thus, among the government and the opposition. This leads to the main research question: *Are the amendments of the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak parliament that are of a redistributive character used primarily by majoritarian governments to redistribute the power among the parliamentary actors?* This question is based on a rational assumption, as there has been a tradition of majoritarian governments in Slovakia. It will be answered through conducting a content analysis of all proposed amendments, primarily focusing on the dichotomous redistributive-effective changes. Additionally, the analysis will also focus on the process of passing the successful amendments of the Rules of Procedure – more specifically, to the question of whether they were passed consensually, in agreement between the government and the opposition, or with only partial or no agreement because, as they hold the majority in the Slovak parliament, governments can pass amendments to the parliamentary rules even without the opposition's support.

Thus this paper might offer interesting insight into the process of institutionalisation of the parliament of this young post-communist country, established only in 1993. This might say a lot about the institutionalisation of its legislative-executive relations over time, but also, and no less importantly, it might provide an interesting case study comparable to existing analyses of Western democracies. The analysed period is long enough to identify progress in this field over time, as it terminates in the ongoing electoral period (from March 2016) in which the government of Social democrats Smer-SD, the national party SNS, and the ethnic party Most-Híd have passed the most extensive and controversial amendments to the parliamentary rules.

The paper is organised as follows: First, it introduces the theoretical framework of the analysis and the state of the art. Second, it describes the methodological framework and provides the reader with information about the creation of the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak parliament. And finally, it presents an overall analysis of its proposed amendments, followed by a section focusing on the amendments that were passed.

2. Theoretical Framework and State of the Arts

Rational Choice Institutionalism assigns special importance to political institutions by stressing the fact that they determine political behaviour. It assumes that political actors always behave in accordance with a motivation to maximally reach their own goals and, thus, they always calculate. Then, when analysing politics, it can always be assumed that no political output is optimal since, by its creation, at least one actor becomes advantaged while others become disadvantaged. The Parliamentary Rules of Procedure as particular institutions might be defined as 'rules of the game created by players themselves' (Shepsle 2005: 1–2). They are created, passed and changed by parliamentary actors themselves, and then, as Müller (1993) claims, they influence the actors by limiting the scale of their strategic options. Thus, the main assumption behind amending these rules should be based on the paradigm of Rational Choice Institutionalism – in case of countries with a tradition of majoritarian governments, it might be assumed that the governments would amend these rules with the rational aim to strengthen their position vis-á-vis the parliamentary minority, usually represented by the opposition. Thus, these changes would be primarily of a redistributive character. This is supported, for instance, by arguments of Sieberer and Müller who claim that 'parliamentary actors have a vivid interest in specific parliamentary rules and may consider changing them as a promising strategy for reaching their substantive goals' (Sieberer, Müller 2015: 998).

Arguments for analysing such amendments also lie elsewhere. As Malová and Michálek (2004: 33) state, 'Parliaments are the centre of political systems and the symbol of representative democracy'. Representative democracy is, according to Müller et al. (2009), built upon three pillars – the constitution, electoral law and parliamentary rules of procedure. And as this is true, it is important to fill the existing gap in the institutional research where other types of institutions are analysed much more frequently than the parliamentary standing orders themselves.

If analysed, there have been almost exclusively one country case studies (see, for example, Flinders 2007; Foundethakis 2003; or Filipe 2009). Müller et al. (2009) bring an interesting analysis that compares parliamentary rules in 27 European countries[1] with at least 1 million inhabitants and a minimum of ten years of existence as a parliamentary democracy. The analysed period begins in 1945 or in the year when democratization in the particular country started. A comparative analysis is conducted in several separate categories, based on two different criteria – the actual length of the amendments to the Rules of Procedure and the number of these amendments. According to their findings, during the whole period under analysis, these rules were changed the most number of times (per year as well

as in general) in Great Britain. Considering all countries under analysis, the parliamentary rules were amended twice per electoral term on average and, considering particular regions, the amendments were more frequent in Eastern Europe. In fact, this cannot be considered surprising since the parliaments in these countries, as well as their Rules of Procedure, are relatively new and their institutional set up had to adapt to the new situations they were facing. Most of the countries under analysis almost doubled the length of these rules during the analysed period. In the context of the methodological framework of such analysis, I consider it necessary to stress that the length of a particular amendment does not reflect its respective importance. It may be assumed that significant prolongation of the parliamentary rules would probably influence more aspects of parliamentary action and would be, thus, more important. However, this should always be supported by a content analysis. Another paper written by Sieberer and Müller (2015) builds on the previous findings and formulates a set of hypotheses that are later tested on a case study of Austrian parliament. Similarly, Sieberer et al. (2011) bring a systematic analysis of all the amendments of the parliamentary Rules of Procedure in Austria, Germany and Switzerland in the period from 1945 to 2010. The analysis was primarily quantitative since the authors focused on the number and length of these amendments. However, they looked at their content as well and defined three external trends that were reflected in the amendments of the Rules of Procedure. These were: European integration, reforms passed in the 1960s and 70s generally attempting to institutionally deepen the functioning of democratic institutions, and, finally, a process of specialisation and professionalization of the parliaments.

A qualitative rather than quantitative analysis of the Rules of Procedure of the Slovenian legislature was conducted by Fink-Hafner and Krašovec (2009). The authors conducted a content analysis of the amendments of the Rules of Procedure with the aim to create categories of the institutional adaptation of the Slovenian Parliament. They define these three categories as: institutional adaptation to modernisation and development of liberal democracy, an integration into the European Union, and a change in the character of the party system (Fink-Hafner, Krašovec 2009: 3). These factors did not appear at the same time – in the 1990s, the first of them was the most influential; later, the institutional adaptation was dominated by the political prioritisation of integration into the European Union. Afterwards, the changes in the character of the party system and the increase in the government-opposition division were the dominant reasons for the institutional changes to the parliamentary rules.

When we turn our attention back to the theory, the main assumption of Rational Choice Institutionalism is that when amending the Rules of Procedure, MPs attempt to reach particular goals. They may or may not be egoistic. As was stated above, according to Tsebelis (1990), we should distinguish between the *redistributive* and *effective* changes of the Rules of Procedure. However, the above-mentioned studies of the amendments of these rules does not reflect this dichotomy. On the other hand, from those who conducted qualitative analyses it might be implicitly derived that an absolute majority of these amendments were of effective character (see primarily Fink-Hafner, Krašovec 2009; and Sieberer et al. 2011). Thus, we might it consider a norm in analysed Western countries that parliamentary institutionalisation is rather of effective character.

3. Methodological Framework

Following the theory and assumptions presented in the previous section, the analysis of all Rules of Procedure amendments was conducted. The period under analysis varies. In case of analysis of all proposed amendments, including those not passed, it was the period from October 2002 to December 2016. There are practical reasons for setting the analysed period this way: the data on amendment proposals are not available for the 1994–1998 and 1998–2002 electoral terms and thus cannot be analysed. This is due to an overall absence of online data sources of proposed bills in these electoral terms, which were later digitalized and provided online. The period in which all passed amendments were analysed is, because of the full availability of the data (in case of passed laws only), widened to the period from December 1996, when the Law on the Rules of Procedure came into force, to December 2016. When considering the end of the analysed period, I decided not to end up strictly at the end of the last electoral term in March 2016, in this case the second government of Robert Fico, especially because of the fact that the third government of this Prime Minister brought a 'new air' into amending the parliamentary rules and the very last amendment proposal of Speaker Andrej Danko (president of the national party SNS) and his colleagues may be considered one of the most controversial amendment proposals of the parliamentary rules ever. This makes the period long enough to consider the process of the institutional adaptation of the Slovak Republic in a wider context.

In this paper, the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure are operationalised as a Law on the Rules of Procedure of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, any legally and officially proposed amendments of these rules archived by the National Council are operationalised as the proposed changes. Particular parliamentary party groups and their governmental or oppositional status are taken as analysed actors amending these rules. The analysis of the proposed amendments of the Rules of Procedure was of a combined character, considering the number of amendments and voting on them in the plenary in a quantitative context but primarily focusing on the qualitative aspect, by conducting a content analysis providing an in-depth one country case study. When doing so, the data of all proposed amendments of the Rules of Procedure were qualitatively analysed, coded and sorted into categories. These categories were identified prior to the analysis, reflecting all the main aspects of parliamentary behaviour, which are institutionalized by an original Law on the Rules of Procedure. They were not mutually exclusive, so any amendment or its individual paragraph could be assigned to more than one category. Taking the period from the third to the seventh electoral term of the Slovak Parliament into account, 59 of these amendments were analysed and 21 content categories were identified. These categories were later synthesized into 10 broader categories regulating the same sphere of parliamentary behaviour. Moreover, all passed amendments were analysed separately according to their redistributive or effective character.

This approach, which is primarily of a qualitative character, was chosen in accordance with the aim this paper attempts to reach: to provide a complex case study of amendments of the parliamentary rules in a particular country, including looking at their character, the extent of consensus among the parliamentary actors when voting on them, as well as their

effect. In other words, when analysing one country's amendments of the parliamentary rules, I consider such an approach more efficient than focusing strictly on the quantitative aspects, i.e., the length and number of such amendments, previously presented, when describing recent studies in the field. Moreover, as might be seen from the overview of existing research in this field, such methodology has been extensively used by the other authors since the subject of the analysis does not leave much space for applying other methods or deductive logic.

Through such an analysis, the main research question stated above will be answered. To do so, four sub-questions are answered. These are:

1. Are there any particular trends to which the Slovak parliament adapted itself by amending the Rules of Procedure?
2. Is it primarily the government that proposes amendments to these rules?
3. Are the RoP amendments proposed by the majoritarian governments primarily of a redistributive character?
4. Are the redistributive amendments proposed by the government passed consensually?

4. How It All Began: Creation and Character of the Slovak Parliamentary Rules of Procedure

Slovakia became an independent state in January 1993. Previously, Slovakia had belonged to the Czechoslovak Republic. As it was a federation, the Slovak National Council existed as a separate legislature alongside the Federal Assembly. After establishing the independent state, the newly established National Council of the Slovak Republic initially operated under the Rules of Procedure of the former Slovak National Council. The Rules of Procedure of the National Council of the newly established Slovak Republic was first drafted in 1995, and the process of creating the parliamentary rules took 11 months. It was initially supposed to be discussed on 11th November 1995. Nevertheless, it was not discussed at that time, since, as the Speaker of the Parliament Gašparovič concluded, there were too many amendments proposed. He therefore decided to meet with MPs proposing the bill first and to implement all the proposed amendments presented in the Parliament. Thus, a modified bill was proposed and discussed almost one year later, at the meeting of the National Council on 20th September 1996. There were 90 amendments proposed: 33 of them by the governmental MPs, and the rest created by the opposition. Most of the amendments concentrated on plenary session regulations, specific aspects of the legislative process, the selection of candidates to offices in the external institutions by the National Council, discipline in the parliament, and regulations of the sessions of the parliamentary committees. When looking at the ratio of passed and unpassed amendments, there are differences in case of the governmental and oppositional MPs: for the former, the ratio was 30:3, while for latter it was 46:11. Thus, it was a unique case when the opposition strongly influenced the creation of parliamentary rights by amending them before passing. On the other hand, it must be stressed that the initial proposal itself was created by MPs, most of whom were from governmental parties. Thus, the governmental MPs had the chance to exercise their preferences

when creating the bill itself, and not only in the legislative process. This might be also the reason why governmental MPs proposed fewer amendments and were less successful – if their colleagues in the coalition did not push for their individual preferences when creating the bill, the opportunity would not be likely higher up in the legislative process. Having said that, it must be stressed that 35 amendments proposed by the opposition were not accepted. This is a high number, which later resulted in limited support of the opposition when voting on the bill.

When voting on the bill, 121 MPs were present, 77 voted for, 22 voted against, 21 abstained and one did not vote (as stated on the website of the National Council). Thus, it may be concluded that the creation of the Law on the Rules of Procedure of the National Council of the Slovak Republic was not fully consensual but was definitely at least semi-consensual. The passed bill was later refused by President of the Republic Kováč, who proposed further amendments. The National Council then voted again on the refused bill on 24th October 1996, accepting the amendments proposed by the President. According to data on the National Council website, 125 MPs attended the vote, 81 voted for, 26 voted against, 18 abstained. In fact, it was primarily the government that supported the bill in both rounds. In the first one, it was supported by 8 oppositional MPs, and in the second one, it was supported by 10 of them. When describing this vote, Siváková (1999: 202) claims that 'consensual passage of the law on the Rules of Procedure in the end of the year 1996 was a significant milestone in the action of the National Council of the Slovak Republic'. Nevertheless, according to the number of amendments proposed by the opposition, especially those which were not implemented into the bill, as well as to the significantly limited support of the opposition when voting, it may be concluded that there was only partial consensus between the government and the opposition on the character of the parliamentary rules.

5. Review of the Proposed Amendments of the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak Parliament

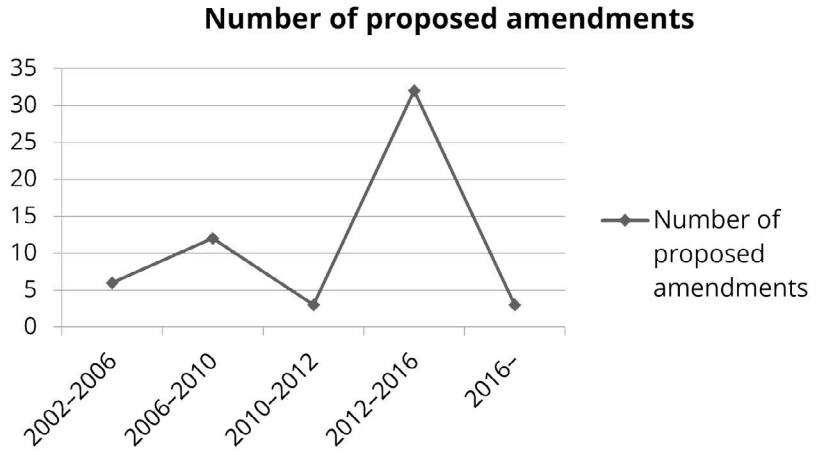
The Rules of Procedure of the National Council of the Slovak Republic are determined by law and may be amended by a simple majority of MPs. An amendment may be proposed by one or more MPs, by the government or by any parliamentary committee. How frequently these amendments were proposed, by whom and what they concentrated on will be now analysed, looking at all the proposed amendments, including those which were not passed by the National Council.

5.1. Proposed Amendments of the Parliamentary Rules

As stated before, I will first focus on all the proposed amendments of the Slovak parliamentary rules. The set rules were all created during the third government of Vladimír Mečiar, which consisted of Mečiar's People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the far-right nationalistic party SNS, led by Ján Slota, and the leftist Union of the Workers of

Slovakia (ZRS), headed by Ján Ľupták. This government may be described as lacking several aspects of democratic standards (see, for example, Mesežnikov 2001), and the consensus between the government and the opposition when passing the rules was rather small. Thus, it may be assumed that the number of proposed amendments would be high in succeeding electoral terms, attempting to correct potential redistributive elements of the parliamentary rules set in this period. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Figure 1, when looking at electoral terms following the government of Vladimir Mečiar (beginning with 2002[2]), this did not happen. On the other hand, there are two other electoral terms worth our attention when concentrating on the number of amendments proposed: the fourth electoral term (2006–2010), when the first government of Robert Fico (coalition of Fico's social-democratic party Smer-Social Democracy, nationalist SNS headed by Slota, and Mečiar's HZDS) was in power, and especially the sixth electoral term (2012–2016), when the second government of Robert Fico, one-party government of his party Smer-SD was in power. In this term, 32 amendments to the parliamentary rules were proposed. However, the number of passed amendments was not significantly high.[3]

Figure 1: Absolute numbers of proposed amendments of the Rules of Procedure in period 2002–2016 in separate electoral terms (counting all of them, including those sharing the same content, thus presented more than once)

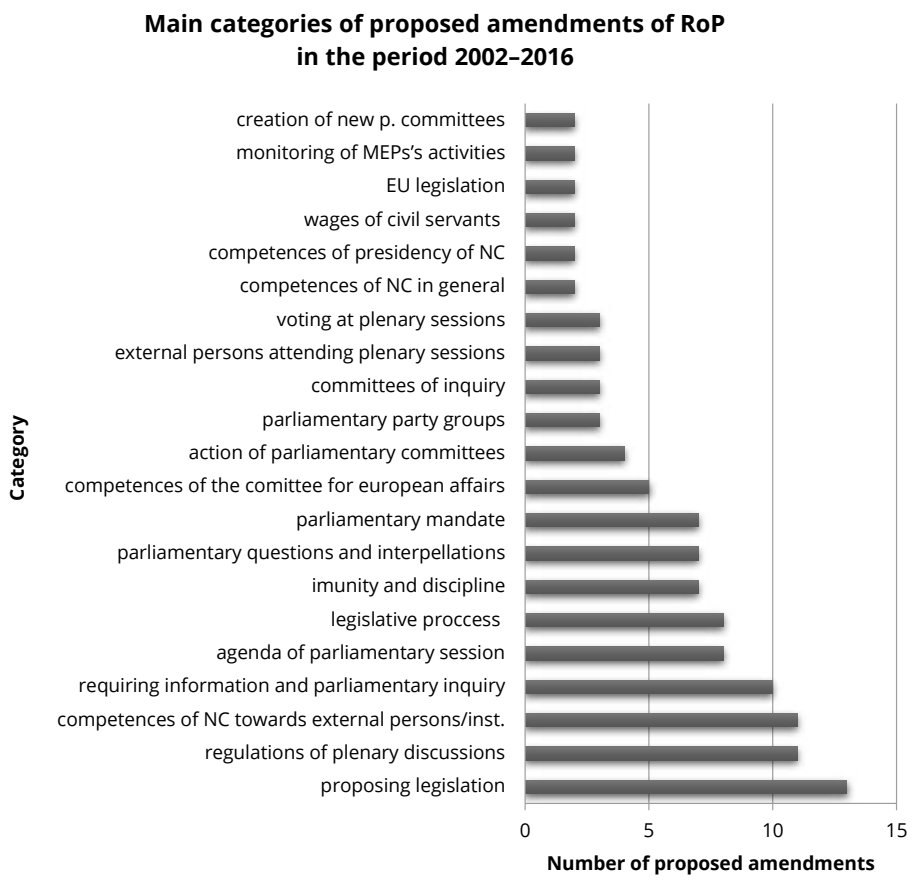


Source: The author, based on data from the National Council of the Slovak Republic website.

Figure 2 shows all categories that were identified in separate amendments more than once, including the amendments proposed repeatedly and those which were later withdrawn by the proposer(s). As can be seen, there are several aspects of parliamentary action or its bodies that were repeatedly identified. Regulations for proposing legislation was the most frequent category found; several amendments also concentrated on regulations for discussion at plenary sessions, especially on the length of an individual's contribution to a debate or the length and frequency of presentations of points of order. Similarly, competences of the Slovak parliament towards external institutions, bodies and persons were

touched on 11 times, focusing primarily on conditions for electing nominees to state bodies and institutions. Another category that should be highlighted, as it arose 10 times, was the requirement for information from external or internal actors by the parliament, including parliamentary inquiry. In seven cases, the proposed amendments concentrated on the legislative process, primarily on regulating how legislation can be changed and during which stages. Other frequent categories are, then, parliamentary immunity, regulation of parliamentary discipline at plenary sessions, and disciplinary proceedings against MPs. It might be said that most of the amendment proposals in the period under analysis aimed to regulate plenary sessions, the legislative process, controlling competences of the National Council towards other (primarily external) bodies, and on relations of the National Council with other institutions. Considering parliamentary committees, 11 of all analysed proposals regulated their action; regulations on the discipline of MPs, their immunity and disciplinary proceeding were stated 6 times.

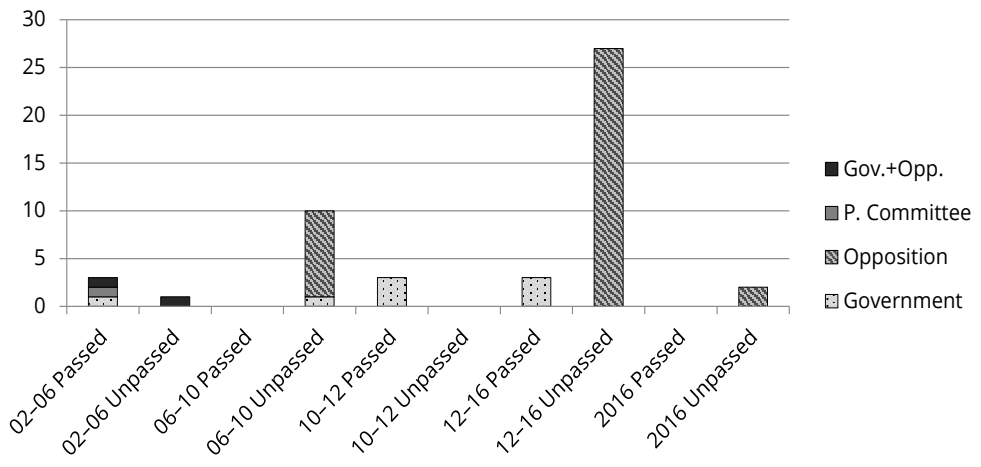
Figure 2: All categories of proposed amendments of RoP in period 2002–2016



Source: The author, based on data from the National Council of the Slovak Republic website.

What can be, then, said about the proposers of all amendments of the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure proposed in the period under analysis? As can be seen in Figure 3, the opposition MPs dominate the statistics of proposing them, with the contribution of 42 separate proposals, while the government MPs brought 10 of them.[4] However, when we look at the passed amendments only, it is a different story – the governments proposed much fewer amendments in comparison with the opposition, but they were absolutely efficient, as all of them were passed. This cannot be said about the opposition attempts, since none of their proposals were passed. Specifically, significant overall activity in amending the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure was observed in the fourth electoral term (2006–2010), when the first government of Robert Fico was in power, and it was even higher in the sixth electoral term (2012–2016), when the government of Robert Fico – after the two-year-long centre-right government of Iveta Radičová (consisting of Christian Democrats from KDH, liberals from SaS, Slovak Democratic-Christian Union SDKÚ-DS, and Most-Híd as a party concentrating on ethnic and national minorities) – came back into power and created the one-party government. During this term, the opposition proposed 31 amendments of the Rules of Procedure. However, none of them were passed by the parliament. And as it is clear from this statistic that the same is true for the whole period under analysis – none of the oppositional proposals of amendments of the Rules of Procedure were passed. Although they were all proposed under the majority government, this statistic is still surprising to some extent, especially when considering the fact that at least some of the other legislative proposals by the opposition were successful in the legislative process, oscillating between 0.5–20% during the period under analysis (Chovancová 2016).

Figure 3: Passed and unpassed amendments of the parliamentary Rules of Procedure and their proposers



Source: The author, based on data from the National Council of the Slovak Republic website.

5.2. First and Second Government of Robert Fico – When the Opposition Acts

Based on the findings presented above, it is interesting to look more closely at the initiatives of the opposition to amend the parliamentary Rules of Procedure, which were significantly frequent in the fourth and sixth electoral term. During the former, when the government of Smer-Social Democracy, national SNS, and HZDS was in power, the opposition MPs from different PPGs proposed eight direct amendments, one of which was later withdrawn by the proposer. The first of them, proposed by a member of the oppositional SDKÚ-DS, attempted to resolve discrepancies among sections of RoP dedicated to points of order, claiming it was only possible to raise o point of order when reacting to somebody's else speech. Another proposal written by members of the same PPG also aimed to resolve discrepancies, but at the same time it also focused on more important issues: they proposed deleting the paragraphs about banning portable devices in the chamber and, most importantly, they proposed adding a statement explicitly regulating that, in the 15 minutes saved for the Prime Minister during the question time, the PM had to answer more than one question in order to make the control function of the question time more efficient. This was a reaction to situations in which the Prime Minister appeared to be obstructing the question time by repeatedly answering only one question in the 15 minutes. Another proposal, written by MPs of KDH, attempted to assure that all proposed bills had to be discussed in the plenary session. This was a reaction to situations when pieces of legislation proposed by the opposition were not even discussed in the plenary.

Another proposal aimed to assure proper registration of MPs' presence at the parliamentary sessions, reacting to the situation when one MP registered somebody else as being present or even voted in the name of somebody else. In this electoral term, this happened to Iveta Radičová, MP from SDKÚ-DS PPG and the future Prime Minister. When voting on passing the amendment of the Law on Education to the third phase of the legislative process, Radičová voted in the name of her colleague from the same PPG, Tatiana Rosová, who could not vote as she was standing behind the speaker's desk presenting the novelisation to the plenary.[5]

Another proposal of KDH focused again on parliamentary question time. It required that in case of questions that were not answered during the question time, questioned persons had to deliver the answer within 30 days. Moreover, it also attempted to restrict the time for answering such questions in the plenary to 3 minutes, presenting supplementary questions to 2 minutes, and reactions to these to only 1 minute. Another amendment proposal, written by members of KDH and SDKÚ-DS PPGs, stated it was only possible to amend a discussed bill in a relevant way and not to supplement it by any irrelevant amendments. After not being successful, such a restriction was later proposed again by another amendment. This is hardly surprising because, in all electoral terms, important legislative regulations were incorporated into completely unrelated bills, which were subsequently smoothly passed by a parliamentary majority. This practice was chosen especially in case of amendments of at least a partially controversial or non-consensual character so the discussion about them was skipped and there was no space given to amending such regulations in the plenary.[6]

Another proposal, written by MPs from KDH, concentrated on regulation of the agenda of the plenary session, stating in its explanatory statement that its aim was to 'assure the real democratic and free discussion in the National Council', because 'such discussion is the base of parliamentarism'. It claimed that the National Council shall vote on the agenda of the plenary session at the outset. Moreover, it required that it would be possible to skip any agenda item only with the agreement of the proposers. Similarly, adding an item to or deleting it from the agenda would possible if at least three PPGs proposed to do so.

The opposition was even more active in the sixth electoral term, when the single-party government of Smer-Social Democracy was in power. At that time, oppositional MPs proposed 29 direct amendments to the Law on the Rules of Procedure, members of liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) PPGs being the most active of the MPs. Instead of describing each proposed amendment, let me briefly sum up the categories they concentrated on. In the very first amendment, the proposers concentrated on the registration of MPs present at the plenary session. In succeeding amendment proposals, they focused on more complex questions, such as, for instance, the creation of a new parliamentary committee (the Committee on the European Stabilisation Mechanism); another amendment proposal brought the creation of the parliamentary inquiry, a mechanism that could be used by MPs to ask members of the government or other civil servants any questions needed to accomplish their work tasks. Later, oppositional MPs, through amendment proposals, attempted to institutionalise the restriction of entry to the meeting hall for persons under the influence of alcohol and drugs and attempted to raise penalties for breaching parliamentary discipline. The opposition also proposed several changes to the legislative process: legislative initiative would also be given to petitions with the signatures of at least 15,000 Slovak citizens as well as to the President of the Republic; voting on any bill should follow a debate about it and could not take place later; one particular amendment also proposed what exactly should be stated in the explanatory statement of any bill proposed. When touching on EU-related issues in the legislative process, oppositional MPs proposed a procedure for cases if the Committee on European Affairs did not provide its position towards a particular bill when required to do so. The others concentrated on the plenary sessions: the agenda of a plenary session could be changed only with the agreement of all the MPs who proposed the session; again, they also came up with the request that at the plenary session, all motions proposed before the session had to be discussed at the succeeding plenary session, and not at any other later on, and that each plenary session ought to be recorded and archived.

Members of OĽaNO PPG also proposed changes to the election of the President of the National Control Authority; other proposals created by oppositional parties dealt with EU-related issues: they attempted to set rules for the assessment of compliance of legislative acts of the European Union with the principle of subsidiarity. Another amendment appeared to be institutionally problematic, as it proposed setting specific rules for the oversight of Slovak MEPs by the Slovak parliament, despite the fact that there was no direct relation between these two institutions and their members. And finally, the very last oppositional amendment proposal focused on the parliamentary oversight of the government: the government would have to regularly present a report on the state of the implementation of its program declaration.

Although many of these proposals were written in reaction to specific situations taking place in the legislature that the Rules of Procedure did not institutionalise or did not institutionalise efficiently enough, none of them were passed in the National Council. Of course, this was, to a significant extent, due to the redistributive character of the proposals, which frequently attempted to restrict the strength of the government vis-à-vis the opposition. On the other hand, many of these proposals were effective at the same time, attempting to raise the efficiency of parliament's action in a wide range of aspects. Despite this, none of the proposed amendments were passed, including those of non-controversial and purely effective character. Instead, three proposals made by MPs of the governmental Smer-SD, concentrating on many categories that were also touched on by oppositional proposals[7], passed smoothly.

5.3. Passed Amendments – What Was Changed, Why and by Whom?

The following chapter brings a complex overview of passed changes to the Rules of Procedure. Because of the limited length of this article, all of them are systematically summed up in Table 1. Thus, instead of describing each of them separately, the space will be given to specific amendments which are considered significant either because of the extent to which they change the Rules of Procedure or because of the context of proposing them or voting on them in the legislature.

The first notable amendment was proposed and passed in the second electoral term (1998–2002) when the first centre-right government of Mikuláš Dzurinda was in power. It amended the set rules to a significant extent. These changes were proposed with the aim to regulate the legislative process – the amendment regulates the length of time for presenting points of order, for instance by stating that 'it is impossible to react to the point of order by another point of order'. It also states that a procedural motion must be presented in less than one minute. Moreover, according to this amendment, it is possible to pass the closure of an ongoing parliamentary debate, or 'the National Council may, based on the proposal by at least two PPGs, agree on the length of time of the discussion about any point of the agenda of the parliamentary session'. Nevertheless, this time cannot be shorter than 12 hours. The amendment also says that 'when discussing the bill it is possible to propose those motions which extend the bill only with the agreement of its proposer(s) and it may be done before voting on it at the very latest'. In short, this amendment is considered important because of the wide range of categories in which it changes the Rules of Procedure. And it is not only about changing the Rules; in several aspects, particular sections of the Rules of Procedure were ameliorated, since when applying the new parliamentary rules in practise, several drawbacks emerged. On the other hand, the amendment also restricts the parliamentary debate and the options of the parliamentary actors to contribute to the debate, including the option to close it. Thus, it is of an effective and redistributive character at the same time. Furthermore, when looking at how the parliament voted on this amendment, this process was not consensual, primarily because of its (partially) redistributive character; it was supported by a clear majority of governmental MPs but only by minimum of oppositional MPs.

Another amendment of similarly important character was passed several years later. The 2010–2012 electoral term, when the heterogeneous centre-right government of Iveta Radičová came into power, however, brought far more complicated issues into amending the parliamentary rules; these were due to the process of electing the Attorney General. When it came to voting on the new Attorney General, the initial discussion about the common candidate of the ruling government started in October 2010. 'The first vote on the Attorney General was a clear example of the disunity of the government PPGs, since members of SDKÚ-DS voted for one candidate, Ján Hrivnák, while the other PPGs voted for Eva Mišíková' (Chovancová 2016: 221). Thus, paradoxically, it was not the candidate of the governing coalition but a completely different candidate who won the first round of the election – former Attorney General Dobroslav Trnka – enjoying the support of oppositional party Smer-SD. This was not, however, the final vote, since an absolute majority is needed to elect the candidate to this post and he did not reach the quorum. And since the same happened again in the second round, the government decided to change their strategy and to support a different candidate, Jozef Čentéš. The government had enough votes for making this election successful. Nevertheless, he obtained only seventy-four votes while at least seventy-six votes were needed. In the fourth round, candidate Trnka almost reached the quorum, obtaining seventy-one votes. Afterwards, 'as a recipe to overcome the government's inability to vote consistently, four MPs from the government PPGs proposed an amendment of the Rules of Procedure changing this vote from secret-ballot to an open one. This proposal, in addition to other changes, stated that 'any secret-ballot vote in the National Council can be changed to an open vote if a resolution regarding this vote is passed by a minimum of fifteen MPs' (Chovancová 2016: 221). Thus, the government could use this change to control its own MPs when voting on the Attorney General. The vote on this amendment was supported by seventy-nine MPs; none of the oppositional MPs supported the bill, while whole government voted in favour, as did two independent MPs. President Ivan Gašparovič, however, sent the law back to the parliament, which passed it once again.

Even though it may appear that this was the end of the story, it did continue. Acting Attorney General Ladislav Tichý sent the law to the Constitutional Court asking for a constitutional review. While doing so, the Constitutional Court, as not so many times before, decided to suspend the execution of this law. Under these conditions, another vote was again cast on a secret-ballot, this time with one candidate only. Trnka decided not to participate in the competition so Čentéš became the only potential winner, finally being successful and legally elected to the position of Attorney General (Kern, Petková 2011). However, the President refused to appoint him and continued to hold this position until the end of his electoral term since, as he kept highlighting, the President was obliged to consent to such a candidate and appoint the candidate nominated by the Parliament, but the Constitution does not state that the President necessarily has to do so. To sum it up, this process did not end up successfully for Čentéš, nor for the government, as it revealed deep inter-party conflicts not just between the government and the opposition but also between the parties of the governing coalition. When looking at the performance of Radičová's cabinet, this was just the beginning of its problems with the lack of cohesion when voting on important issues, which later led to its collapse.

Table 1: Overview of all amendments of the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak National Council of the Slovak Republic from December 1994 to October 2016

Law number	Electoral term	Proposer	Gov./Opp.	Category	Effective/ Redistributive	Consensual/ non-consensual/ semi-consensual
1. 77/1998	2.	Constitutional Court	X	Legislative process	X	X
2. 86/2000	3.	SDKÚ	Government	Legislative process	Redistributive + effective	Semi-Consensual
3. 138/2002	3.	SMK-MKP, KDH, ANO, HZDS	Government and opposition	Legislative process	Effective	Consensual
4. 360/2004	4.	KDH, ANO, SMK	Government	Committees	Effective	Consensual
5. 253/2005	4.	Committee on European Affairs	X	Europeanisation/ Committees	Effective	Semi-consensual
6. 320/2005	4.	Constitutional Court	X	Control of the government by the National Council	Effective	X
7. 153/2011	5.	KDH, SDKÚ-DS, Most-Híd, SaS	Government	Election and recall of functionaries discipline	Redistributive	Non-consensual
8. 187/2011	5.	Committee on European Affairs	X	Europeanisation/ Committees	Effective	Non-consensual
9. 237/2011	5.	Constitutional Court	X	Election and recall of functionaries	Redistributive	X
10. 330/2012	6.	Smer-SD	Government	The Speaker, Legis. process	Redistributive	Consensual
11. 309/2013	6.	Smer-SD	Government	PPGs	Redistributive	Non-consensual
12. 399/2015	6.	Smer-SD	Government	Legislative process, parliamentary inquiry, interpellations, ethics	Effective	Semi-consensual
13. 1/2017	7.	SNS, Smer-SD, Most-Híd, Sieť	Government	Parliamentary discussion	Redistributive	Non-consensual

Source: The author, based on the data from the website of the National Council of the Slovak Republic; Law. Nr. 350/1996 and all its amendments and Overview of Work of the Slovak Constitutional Court available on its website.

The second government of Robert Fico (2012–2016), the one-party government of Smer-Social democracy, brought three direct changes to the parliamentary rules, two of them having a redistributive effect on parliamentary actors. Law no. 330/2012 brought wider competences to the Speaker of the National Council, now having competence to interrupt the parliamentary discussion on any agenda item or to bring any additional item to the agenda. Thus, it may be concluded that the parliamentary opposition may experience

a negative effect of this amendment when discussing an agenda item proposed by its MPs. This can be also concluded about another change of the Rules of Procedure passed during this electoral term; Law no. 309/2013, proposed by four MPs of the governmental Smer-SD. It explicitly says that the minimum of eight members needed when creating the PPG cannot drop under this quorum during its whole existence throughout the electoral term. Before, this was only the quorum for its creation and small PPGs could exist even in case some of their members left the PPG and they were no longer reached the quorum. For this reason, this change may be considered redistributive. And it must be said that it was primarily the opposition and their MPs who used to leave their PPGs and performed as independent or unaffiliated MPs, while the governing Smer-SD did not experience such fluctuations. On the other hand, it lacks an effective aspect, as smaller PPGs or lower numbers of existing PPGs do not cause higher effectivity or efficiency of actions of the parliament. Thus, it may be characterised as redistributive change.

The more surprising aspect of these two changes is their support in the legislature. Although both were of a redistributive character, the former was passed consensually (supported by 137 MPs, including most of the opposition) while only the latter was of a non-consensual character. The reason behind the oppositional support for the first of them probably lies in the argument of its proposers. They claimed that although Smer-SD did have the biggest PPG, it could not propose particular actions in the plenary that were assigned to a combination of two or three PPGs only. This means that even smaller numbers of MPs had stronger competences than members of the biggest PPG. Thus, the same competences were assigned to the Speaker, being a member of Smer-SD. In my opinion, this was supported by the opposition because it did assign stronger competences to the government, however, not by weakening the competences of the opposition. Otherwise, it would hardly have been supported by its MPs.

5.4. When the Last Is Absolutely not the Least – Speaker Danko's Amendment Proposal

During the third government of Robert Fico, which consisted of Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd and, until September 2016, also Sieť[8], it was again the government that came up with the amendment proposals for the Rules of Procedure. It was primarily Speaker of the Parliament Danko who decided to 'protect the working efficiency of the National Council' and 'to assure discipline in the meeting hall' by proposing, together with his four colleagues, a new, relatively extensive amendment. The main points of this amendment regulated discipline in the meeting hall and the registration of MP's presence at the plenary session. Along with that, the proposal also aimed to change the regulations of the legislative process, which is worth our attention. For instance, there was an effort to restrict the time for individual speeches at the plenary discussion; it also proposed that a single individual should only be allowed to give a speech once per discussion and could sign up for it in only one way. It also proposed a rule that the amendments to a discussed bill needed to be proposed before they were presented in the plenary, otherwise they would not be discussed. Moreover, it aimed to prohibit any audio presentation, visual presentation, or audio-visual presentation by MPs in

the plenary. This was a reaction to Andrej Danko's displeasure with the presentation given by Igor Matovič, member of oppositional OĽaNO PPG, at the plenary session in which he brought a banner which read 'Decent people pay taxes, thieves live from them', attempting to single out the affairs of the government. After being asked to fold the banner down, Matovič refused to do so. As a reaction, Vice-Speaker Bugár interrupted the session (in which the confidence vote for the Minister of Interior Kaliňák was supposed to take place) and Danko claimed he would propose changes to the parliamentary rules to 'prevent exhibitionism in the parliament' (Pravda.sk 2016). A brief time after this, a strong negative reaction of the opposition appeared. As oppositional MP Lipšic said, 'the coalition broke the Rules of Procedure in a way in which even Vladimír Mečiar did not do' because (…) 'legislation has been allowing visual devices for decades' (Pravda.sk 2016). The opposition accentuated that such an amendment would be undemocratic since it did not provide equal opportunities for presentation in the plenary for government and opposition. Accordingly, while any member of the government could speak for as long he or she desired, the oppositional MP had only 20 minutes to react to such speeches[9] (HN Televízia 2016).

The amendment was discussed at a parliamentary panel on 31st August 2017 in a very conflicted atmosphere – several oppositional MPs presented their disagreement with such changes. Lucia Nicholson, MP from the oppositional Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), presented the opinion of a significant number of oppositional MPs, explaining their disagreement with the amendment in three main points: (1) timing of its presentation since they considered it an attempt to cover up the problems of the government with corruption affairs; (2) it, according to them, did not allow executing the mandate of a deputy and restrained the opposition; (3) such an amendment should have been created as a compromise between the government and the opposition, so a common working group had to be created to write such an amendment proposal (Nicholson 2016). Instead of allowing a constructive discussion about these issues, Speaker Danko, according to Nicholson, used personal insults against her.

After the discussion about the amendment and after incorporating several amendments into the bill, this amendment was passed by the parliament on 26th October with strong disapproval of the opposition. According to data available at the website of the National Council, 79 MPs voted in favour (all present MPs from governmental Smer-SD, Most-Híd and SNS supported the bill together with four unaffiliated MPs), all members of the oppositional PPG of People's Party – Our Slovakia abstained, PPGs of SaS and OĽaNO voted against, together with four unaffiliated MPs. President Kiska brought the law back to the Parliament, claiming that the amendment restricted the opportunities of the opposition to execute policies and it allowed for bullying in the process of chairing the parliamentary sessions. Prime Minister Fico responded offensively, saying he did not know why the President 'poked the internal issues of the National Council' (Dugovič 2016). Nevertheless, the Parliament passed the amendment once again on December 6th, being supported by 79 MPs, while 50 of them were against and 14 abstained (Dugovič 2016).

Let us summarize the effects of this amendment that are visible since January 2017, when the plenary sessions began being operated under the new Rules of Procedure. The most notable change they brought into parliamentary practices is the restriction of speeches in the plenary, being set at a maximum of 20 minutes for Vice-Speakers and ministers, although

not applied to the Prime Minister, the Speaker or the President of the Republic. However, in the case of an upcoming vote of no-confidence of any minister, the minister may speak without any time restrictions. Time limits for speeches of MPs are, however, different. In contrast to the original version of the bill, they can hold a speech in the plenary discussion twice – once based on their written enrolment but also after verbal enrolment. In case of the former, an MP may speak for 30 minutes; in case of the latter, it is set to 10 minutes only. Another section of the amendment is more normative – it is the section stating that a chairperson of a plenary session may exclude any MP from the parliamentary hall who 'crosses the boundaries of decency' after not respecting two warnings. It solely depends on the chairperson what it means to cross these boundaries and an exclusion may be misused to restrict the opposition. Furthermore, according to this amendment, when in the plenary hall, MPs cannot use mobile phones, cannot make videos and cannot eat. More importantly, as stated before, they cannot use visual or audio-visual means of presentation. Such a restriction means a ban on any visual objects when making a speech in the plenary, including showing graphs or graphics. These are especially important when discussing specific issues, complex policies or economy-related bills and were repeatedly used in the Slovak parliament, although MPs do not use electronic presentations but printed out papers and banners only. Another crucial point is that several restrictions appear to limit the rights of individual MPs and appear to be in conflict with the Constitution. Thus, several oppositional MPs proposed Constitutional review motion of this amendment. Furthermore, members of PPG of OĽaNO and one PPG of SaS claim they will also submit the amendment to the European Court of Human Rights (Dugovič 2016).

6. Conclusion

There are several things that may be concluded about the institutional adaptation of the Slovak Parliament and that make the outputs of such an analysis interesting in the context of explaining the institutional formation of Slovak parliamentarism. First, it is not the government who dominates the process of proposing amendments to the parliamentary rules. When proposing them, the opposition prevails. However, when we look at passed amendments only, the government is, then, the dominant actor. The assumption that the amendments of the Rules of Procedure are primarily of a redistributive character was not verified. Despite the fact that an amendment of the parliamentary rules may be used by the governmental majority to redistribute the power in the parliament, in practise, such behaviour is rather infrequent and cannot be described as a government weapon against the opposition. Law no. 86/2000 may be considered redistributive, as it brought more efficiency into the legislative process, however, at the same time, it restricted the rights of the opposition to participate in the discussion in the plenary. One amendment that was significantly redistributive was Law no. 153/2011. The Radičová government aimed to strengthen its influence in the election of the Attorney General by using this law to change the secret ballot to an open one when electing the Attorney General. Similarly, Law no. 309/2013, proposed by the government, provided stricter restrictions on small and, thus, primarily oppositional

PPGs. Neither of these changes were passed consensually and this shows that there is an identifiable relationship between the redistributive character of the amendment and the non-consensual or at least semi-consensual character of its passage in the parliament. This has been verified by the very last amendment proposed by Danko, also being of a redistributive character and again not passed consensually – no MP from the opposition voted in favour, no MP from the government voted against, making it absolutely non-consensual.

The only exception is Law no. 330/2012 which was, at least to some extent, of a redistributive character, as it assigned wider competences to the Speaker of the National Council. Nevertheless, it was widely supported by the opposition. As was argued above, this could happen since it did not weaken the competences of the opposition. Thus, the argument that the amendments strengthening the government and weakening the opposition at the same time would not be supported by the opposition is still valid. Besides these cases, there was only one case of an amendment which did not have a redistributive character and was not passed consensually – this was the Law no. 187/2011 that changed the sections of the Rules of Procedure operationalising action, competences and duties of the European Affairs Committee. When voting on this amendment, only four non-governmental MPs voted in favour. In fact, an absolute consensus on the actions and competencies of the European Affairs Committee was absent in the entire period under analysis, since the limited support of the opposition was experienced also when passing Amendment no. 253/2005. This might be considered a reflection of the divisions between Slovak political parties in their attitudes towards European integration and its effects on the functioning of the Slovak parliament.

Bringing us back to one of the research questions, it may be assumed that through amending the Rules of Procedure, the Slovak Parliament has adapted itself to particular conditions or trends. It may be concluded that among the factors which initiated the amendment of these rules, the internal factors existing in the parliament prevailed. These factors are: *changing regulations of the legislative process and parliamentary discussion; increasing the discipline of MPs; increasing the institutionalisation of activities of the parliamentary committees and of other functions of the parliament – electing candidates to parliamentary offices or controlling the government.* Additionally, there is one external factor which significantly influences the amendments of the legislative rules: the process of European integration that has led to several changes in the Rules of Procedure. Among these two categories of factors to which the Slovak parliament has adapted, there is the third one which can be identified – the corrective one. It includes the amendments that were created as an act of the Constitutional Court, in all cases eliminating the inconsistency of the parliamentary Rules of Procedure with the Constitution.

It cannot be said that these factors necessarily came one after the other. On the other hand, it can be said that corrective factors were more influential in the first phases of amending the Rules of Procedure, since they were new and their problematical parts arose when applying them in practise; this was followed by Europeanization which prevailed around the year 2004 when Slovakia entered the European Union. The internal factors of amending the Rules of Procedure may be found in each electoral term and it may be assumed that these factors will also prevail in the future since different governments may find various parts of these rules to be institutionalised in a way they do not consider the best.

Footnotes:

1. The Slovak Republic was not included.
2. The first government succeeding the government of Vladimír Mečiar was that of Mikuláš Dzurinda, consisting of his party, the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK), and Party of Civic Understanding (SOP). This government was in power in the second electoral term (1998–2002). However, this government is not displayed in the Figure due to the lack of availability of the data. The Figure displays data starting in the third electoral term (2002–2006), when the second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda was in power. The government was formed by Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), Christian democrats from KDH, liberal party ANO, and SMK.
3. This will be discussed more later, when considering this electoral term in a more specific context.
4. The governmental and oppositional MPs together proposed 3 amendments; the same is true for the Committee on European Affairs.
5. Due to this step, which Radičová considered a mistake and which was extensively criticised by many MPs, she resigned her mandate.
6. This has never been institutionally prohibited in Slovakia. In the Czech Republic, for example, this is not possible and all proposed amendments have to be related to the content of the discussed bill.
7. They will be discussed in the next section specifically dealing with passed amendments.
8. Whose PPG was abolished and thus did not continue as a coalition partner.
9. In Slovakia, members of the government cannot act as MPs. Once appointed minister, a particular person loses her/his mandate as a deputy. If resigned, he/she is given the mandate back.

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