

# Return of Illiberalism: The Results of the 2023 General Election in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

After a general overview of the context of the 2023 general election in Slovakia, the article provides a detailed analysis of the electoral results and support for political parties. Using both aggregate and individual level data, we show that the results were influenced by a combination of long-term features defining electoral support and voting behaviour in Slovakia and a more recent trend including weaker ideological attachment and the increased importance of leadership personality for political party preference. Also, it seems that the illiberal mobilization may be traced in the dynamic of electoral shifts in the context of different behaviour of various societal groups. Moreover, the return of illiberal actors to power in Slovakia seems to have been characterized by a surge of votes for conservative or populist left-wing forces in the larger Slovak cities. Although this is not reflected in the turnout, at the individual level we can assume that liberal voters turned out in smaller numbers, while Smer voters may have been more mobilized, or some voters may have switched from other populist parties such as OĽaNO.

**Keywords:** Slovakia; elections; voting behaviour; illiberalism; populism

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# 1. Introduction

It would not be an exaggeration to state that the results of almost all general elections in Slovakia in the last thirty years have been marked by a high level of unpredictability linked to chronical electoral volatility. The 2023 general election that took place in September 2023 was no exception in this sense. This time, the electoral shifts were facilitated by the chaotic rule of the government coalition led by populist Igor Matovič (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, OĽaNO), including the mishandled Covid-19 crisis. The revelation of the secret import of Russian Sputnik vaccine arranged by Matovič behind the backs of his coalition partners – the right-wing Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, the right-centre For the People party of the former President, Andrej Kiska, and the populist radical right We are Family (Sme rodina) – was the last straw for the already fragile relations in the government. Eventually, the conflict led to the fall of the government and resignation of Prime Minister Matovič in March 2021. The new government, led by the former Minister of Finance Eduard Heger (with Matovič as the new Finance Minister), based on the collaboration of the same parties, did not last long. Suffering from internal disputes, it lost a vote of confidence only after 18 months in office. The period of political uncertainty was prolonged after Heger's cabinet was replaced by a technocratic caretaker cabinet with the economist and Deputy Governor of the Slovak National Bank Ľudovít Ódor as the new Prime Minister. Before the cabinet was appointed, a majority in the parliament passed a constitutional amendment allowing the parliament (with a 3/5 majority) to call snap elections (before that, it was quite complicated to dissolve the parliament). The parliament eventually set the date of the early election for 30 September 2023.

All in all, Slovakia approached the early election in a state of lasting political crisis, chaotic governance and plummeting support for the ex-governing parties. While these conditions usually favour new political challengers, they created a perfect opportunity for one of the biggest political comebacks in the region (Haughton et al., 2024). Former Prime Minister Robert Fico, founder and the only chairman of the left-populist political party Direction (Smer), seemed to be ripe for political retirement. After a series of corruption scandals and allegations of connections of his party to organized crime, Smer lost the 2020 election (Havlík et al., 2023) and suffered an internal split leading to the establishment of a new and instantly popular party – Voice (Hlas), led by Peter Pellegrini, the former Prime Minister, who was sworn in after Fico's resignation in reaction to the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak.

Fico and his party took advantage of the political chaos and ran a campaign promising economic recovery and the return of order and stability to the country, playing an anti-Ukrainian card (calling for peace and promising to stop providing military aid), using Eurosceptic narratives and claiming to fight against migration

and political liberalism. Indeed, Smer's rhetoric started to be very close to what we know from the repertoire of far right political parties (Rybář, 2023).

Given the dramatic drop in support for the political parties of Matovič's former government, Smer found its biggest challenger in Progressive Slovakia (PS). The socially liberal and clearly pro-European party, as part of an electoral coalition, failed to cross the electoral threshold in 2020, but regained support under the new leadership of Michal Šimečka, an Oxford-educated political scientist and MEP. PS sought to present itself as a 'third force' (Rybář, 2023), positioning itself between the ex-governing parties and the far-right camp, out of which Republic (Republika, a splinter party from the neo-fascist Kotleba – People's Slovakia Our Slovakia party) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) emerged as the most serious contenders. As for the ex-governing parties, OĽaNO collaborated with other smaller parties trying to save the remainder of its former electoral support, while SaS and Sme rodina ran independently.

Seven political parties crossed the five-percent electoral threshold, the most significant barrier in an otherwise very proportional electoral system based on one national district (coalitions of two and three parties need to win 7% of the votes and coalitions of at least four political parties need to obtain 10% of the votes).

Smer won the election with 23% of the votes and 42 seats (out of 150), followed by PS (18%, 32 seats) and Hlas (14.7%, 27 seats). The electoral list led by OĽaNO gained 8.9% (16 seats), the Christian and Democratic Movement (KDH) managed to return to parliament after spending a term outside the Slovak National Council, and SNS finished with 5.6% (10 seats). The Republic almost crossed the threshold but failed, and Sme rodina got just over 2% of the votes. The return of Fico was sealed by the formation of the new government. Smer, Hlas, and SNS agreed to form a coalition government with a comfortable majority. Despite being nominally 'social democratic', Smer and Hlas found common ground with SNS quite easily by stressing their shared anti-liberal orientation, critical stance towards the EU, and pro-Russian positions vis-a-vis the war in Ukraine.

Table 1:  
Electoral results

| Political party | Votes   | Vote share (%) | Seats |
|-----------------|---------|----------------|-------|
| Smer            | 681,017 | 22.94          | 42    |
| PS              | 533,136 | 17.96          | 32    |
| Hlas            | 436,415 | 14.7           | 27    |
| OLaNO           | 264,137 | 8.89           | 16    |
| KDH             | 202,515 | 6.82           | 12    |
| SaS             | 187,645 | 6.32           | 11    |
| SNS             | 166,995 | 5.62           | 10    |

Source: statistics.sk; only parties that crossed the electoral threshold are included

The following section provides a closer overview of the electoral results. First, we focus on the party system in Slovakia, emphasizing how it has evolved and changed over time. We then present the main results of the elections. Factors influencing the results included voter turnout and the socio-economic and geographical aspects of party support. Finally, we will discuss the election results from a broader perspective on the future direction of Slovakia, but also in the context of the V4 countries. Our analysis is based on two types of data – aggregated data, which allows for a detailed examination of electoral geographic patterns of elections, and data from an exit poll, which provides information about the turnout and electoral choices of different groups of Slovak citizens. At the same time, our analysis opens the door for a more complex analysis which is provided by the set of articles forming this special issue.

## 2. Slovak party system: a broader context

The evolution of the Slovak political system and party system has mainly been determined by the successes and failures of the three main political parties – HZDS, SDKÚ-DS, and Smer-SD. Analyzing the development of the party system in Slovakia, Leška (2013) distinguishes several phases, namely: (i) the period of the ‘quasi-double-block’ party system, which fulfilled some of the characteristics of polarized pluralism; (ii) the period of transition from polarized pluralism to moderate pluralism; (iii) the period of transition from the model of moderate pluralism to multipartism with one dominant political party.

The first of these periods was characterized by competition between two party blocs over the nature and character of the post-1993 regime. The first group consisted of programmatic parties with clearly defined ideological orientations

that stood for liberal-democratic values: KDH (Christian Democratic Movement), DÚ (Democratic Union), DS (Democratic Party), SDKÚ (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union), SMK (Party of the Hungarian Community), SDL (Party of the Democratic Left). The second group of parties preferred an authoritarian style of government, using populism and nationalism to mobilize voters: HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia), SNS (Slovak National Party), and ZRS (Union of Workers of Slovakia) (Mesežnikov & Gyarfášová, 2018, p. 81). In contrast, the second period, defined by the defeat of V. Mečiar, was characterized by centre-right governments from 1998 to 2002 and from 2002 to 2006 and by the nationalist-left alternation in 2006-2010, when Smer-SD formed a coalition with HZDS and SNS. Gradually, Smer became the dominant actor in Slovak politics, and after the 2012 elections the party did not even need a partner, and formed a majority government for the first time in Slovak history.

The end of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s significantly transformed the party spectrum in Slovakia in several respects, and we believe that this transformation should be seen as what has been called 'hurricane season': a period characterized by (i) the loss of established parties, (ii) the rapid gains by newcomers, and (iii) the equally rapid loss by newcomers to even newer parties (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015). In the case of the Slovak party system, this turbulent period was manifested in several important moments. Firstly, a number of political entities founded by entrepreneurs, the so-called business parties, such as SaS, OĽaNO and Sme rodina, appeared on the political scene, following the example of parties such as SOP, founded by former President Rudolf Schuster, or ANO, founded by entrepreneur Pavel Rusko (Marušiak, 2017). Second, in addition to the anti-establishment element most personified by the OĽaNO party, the 2016 elections also brought an anti-system actor onto the political spectrum in the form of the far-right K-LSNS (Drábik, 2022; Gyarfášová, 2018).

In terms of the birth and disappearance of political parties, the 2016 elections can be considered a truly significant milestone. Some authors referred to them as a 'political earthquake' that significantly redrew the party spectrum (Filipec, 2019; Hlavac, 2016; Rybář & Spáč, 2017). Several new groups (re)entered parliament, such as K-LSNS, Sme rodina, Siet', and the nationalists from the SNS. According to Filipec (2019, p. 30), the Slovak party system after the 2016 elections 'approached the maximum fragmentation experienced in 2002' and also 'led to an increase in the number of effective parties as measured by the Laakso-Taagepera index, with the index rising significantly from 2.5 in 2012 to almost 6, which is approximately the same value as in 2002'. Moreover, it seems that the turbulent and unstable period in Slovak politics is likely to continue. After the 2020 elections, we witnessed splits in several political groups: Hlas split from Smer, former members of K-LSNS around Milan Uhrík and Milan Mazurek founded the Republika party, and former Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Defence Minister Jaroslav Naď

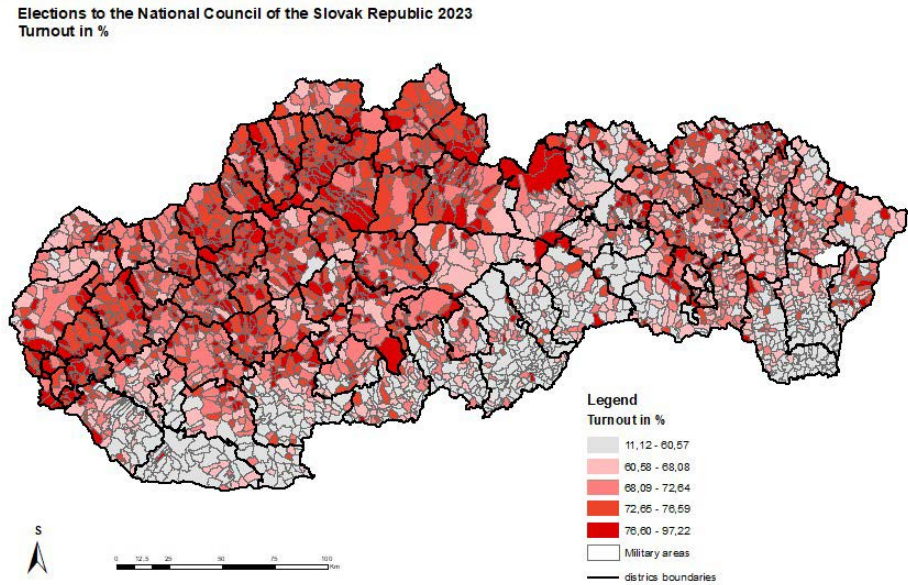
left OLaNO and founded the Demokrati movement. A separate chapter in this history is the disagreement among representatives of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, which resulted in the absence of this constitutive element of Slovak politics from the parliament for the second consecutive term.

### **3. Spatial dynamics of electoral behaviour in the 2023 Slovak elections: voter turnout**

After highly fluctuating turnout in the 1994-2002 period and the lowest turnout in modern history in the 2006 elections (54.67%), turnout gradually stabilized at around 60% in the 2010, 2012, and 2016 elections. As Kevický (2020b) has shown, the 2020 parliamentary elections continued the trends observed in previous elections, where voter turnout was higher in the more socioeconomically developed regions (western and north-western Slovakia) than in the less developed regions (south-central and eastern Slovakia), which have historically had low voter turnout. The 2023 parliamentary elections were remarkable in terms of voter turnout – 68.51%, the third highest in history and the highest in the last two decades – confirmed the upward trend.

As Map 1 of voter turnout shows, the highest levels were in the northern and western parts of Slovakia, while the lowest turnout was in the southern and eastern regions. The gradient colours in the visualization were determined based on quantile classification, a common method for dividing data into intervals where each interval contains an equal number of observations.

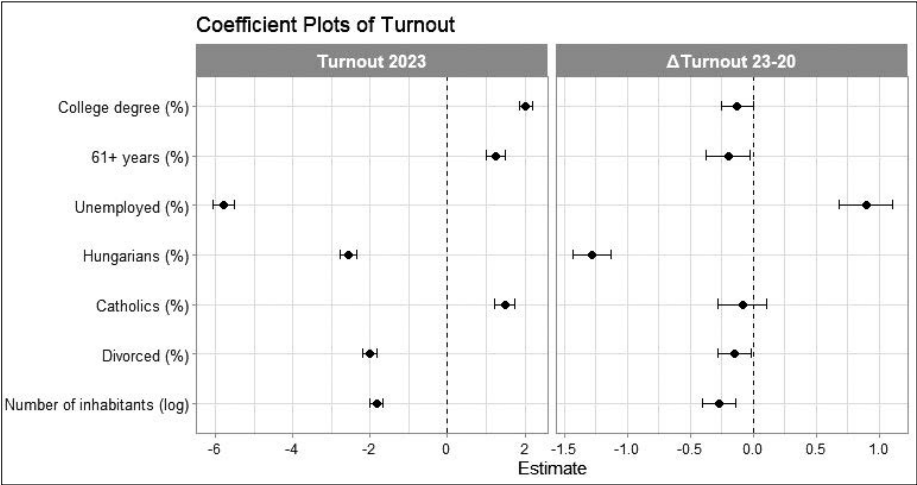
### Map 1: Voter Turnout



Note: Gradient colours are classified by quantiles. Each interval contains an equal number of observations.  
Source: the Slovak Statistical Office.  
Source: The authors.

The first set of regression models (ordinary least squares) is presented in Figure X, which displays the standardized regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. The dependent variable in the first model is voter turnout expressed as a percentage, while the second model focuses on the dynamic change in turnout between the 2023 and 2020 elections (with higher values indicating an increase in turnout in 2023). Each model in this section incorporates a basic set of socio-demographic factors traditionally used to explain the spatial distribution of votes across the country, including the percentage of the population with a college degree, those aged 61 and older, the unemployed, divorced individuals, Catholics, Hungarians, and the number of inhabitants. The data source is the Slovak Statistical Office (SSO), and the level of analysis is at the municipal level, with Bratislava and Košice divided into districts as provided in the electoral and socio-demographic data by the SSO. In total, there are 2,969 geographical units in the statistical models. All models are weighted by the population.

Figure 1:  
OLS Regression Models of Voter Turnout



Note: Number of cases 2,969. Models statistics: Turnout (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.731$ ),  $\Delta$ Turnout 23-20 (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.164$ ). Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via ggplot and broom packages in R. Weighed by the population. Data source: Slovak Statistical Office. Source: The authors.

Voter turnout in Slovakia reflects a complex relationship with the urban-rural divide, consistent with broader trends observed across the post-communist region. Notably, in certain areas, the rural population has historically shown greater electoral engagement compared to the urban population (Plešivčák, 2014). This may explain the global negative coefficient for the number of inhabitants; as municipality size increases, the model predicts a decrease in turnout. However, this difference has lessened over time, particularly since the 2010 elections (Krivý, 2012). In neighbouring Czechia, the turnout is associated positively with municipal size (Lysek et al., 2020b). Generally, the 2023 turnout mirrors the patterns seen in the 2020, 2016, and 2012 elections, in which voter turnout was higher in socio-economically developed regions (higher education and low unemployment), such as western and north-western Slovakia, compared to less developed areas (higher unemployment and divorce rate) like south-central and eastern Slovakia (Kevický, 2020b). Persistent regional disparities have been observed in voter turnout between 1990 and 2023, with consistently low turnout in eastern Slovakia, the southern regions, and Záhorie, and consistently high turnout in north-central Slovakia, and the areas surrounding Nitra and Bratislava. Studies also indicate a relative stability in voter turnout since 2000, with significant variations occurring in only 22 districts (Kevický, 2020).

Regarding the overall electoral dynamic in 2023, it seems that the mobilization of low socioeconomic status (SES) citizens and support for Smer and

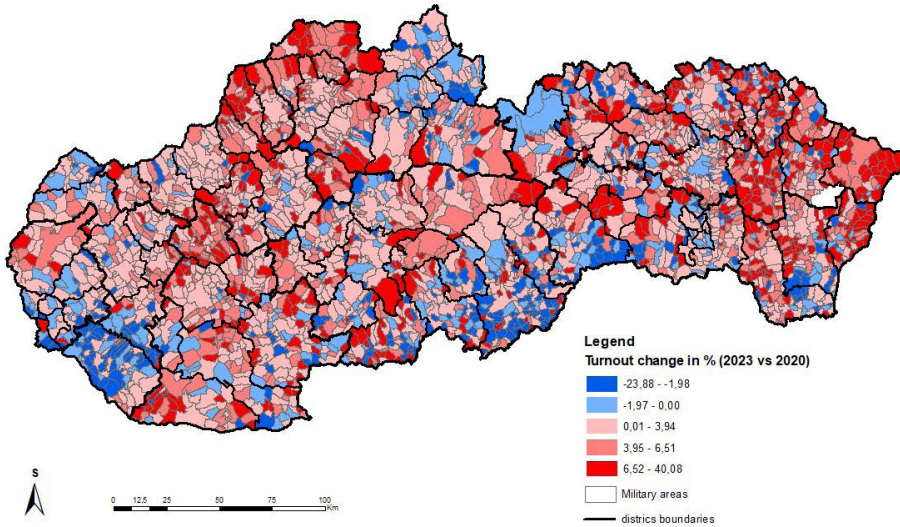


Hlas (see below) was one of the keys to the election. In other words, the Slovak regions with less educated and more unemployed citizens were mobilized more than the others. With regard to the change in voter turnout from 2020, there were negative associations with the percentage of college graduates and the percentage of the population aged 61 and over, while a positive association was observed with the percentage of unemployed. This suggests that less educated and unemployed citizens were more mobilized during the elections than the more educated population living in larger urban clusters. This population is more educated and much more interested in politics, but also much more likely not to vote compared to the rural electorate. Additionally, Krivý (2012) identifies a significant trend of declining voter turnout in municipalities with a substantial Hungarian population in the southern and south-eastern parts of the country. The second model confirms this trend, as the decrease in turnout was higher in regions populated by the Hungarian minority.

The abovementioned arguments are supported by Map 2 below, which shows the relative increase or decrease in voter turnout in the two consecutive general elections. The map shows that the largest clusters of voter mobilization were found in the Prešov and Košice regions (in districts such as Snina, Svidník, Stropkov, Medzilaborce, and Humenné), in the Kysuce region in the north, and in the historical region of Považie (in districts such as Púchov, Považská Bystrica, Ilava). In western Slovakia, voter mobilization can be observed mainly in districts such as Malacky, but also in districts with a Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia, such as Komárno and Nové Zámky, which are rather exceptional in this respect. As can be seen, it was the districts in southern Slovakia with a significant Hungarian minority, districts such as Dunajská Streda and Galanta na západním Slovensku, together with the southern, least developed districts, such as Lučenec, Rimavská Sobota and Rožňava, whose voters went to the polls to a lesser extent than in 2020. From this point of view, the most interesting finding is probably the fact that districts in the north of Slovakia, in the Orava region, such as Tvrdošín, Dolný Kubín and Námestovo, which were among the districts with consistently high voter turnout, were significantly demobilized in 2023. A certain demobilization of voters can also be observed in the largest city, Bratislava, and to a lesser extent in Košice.

**Map 2:**  
**Turnout change between the 2020 and 2023 elections**

Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023  
Turnout change in %



Note: Gradient colours are classified by quantiles but the upper bound of a second interval is set to 0 such that the blue colour shows a decrease and the red colour an increase in turnout in percentage points. Each interval contains a roughly equal number of observations. Source: Slovak Statistical Office.  
Source: The authors.

#### 4. Electoral behaviour in the Slovak 2023 elections: vote shares and spatial dynamics

As for the assessment of support for political parties, we build our analysis around the traditional Slovakian electoral geography research (Baráth, et al., 1995; Krivý, 1999a, 1999b; Krivý et al., 1996; Vlčková, 1995). The first pioneering studies of Slovak electoral geography and electoral behaviour identified statistically significant and non-random concentrations of vote shares without explanation, focusing only on identifying core and peripheral areas of electoral support for Slovak political parties. Existing research on electoral geography and voting behaviour in Slovakia over the last decade has expanded knowledge in all of the above directions and fields, with individual studies mostly mapping particular parliamentary elections and analyzing specific aspects of voting behaviour and the territorialization of party support (see Gyárfášová & Slosiarik, 2016; Krivý, 2012; Krivý & Majó, 2018; Lysek et al., 2020a; Nestorová-Dická & Molnár, 2012;

Rybář et al., 2017). The already identified patterns can be traced in the 2023 Slovakian parliamentary elections.

Taking into account the specificities of each region, we know that we can observe dichotomous division of the country into the above-average politically represented 'north-west' and the below-average or under-represented 'south-east', which more or less coincides with the dichotomy in regional socio-economic levels (Madleňák, 2017, pp. 164–165). This division is reflected in the composition of the Slovak parliament, in which the Bratislava region has several times more representation than other regions. In other words, the more economically developed western part of the country is much better represented politically than the peripheral regions of eastern Slovakia (Madleňák, 2019, p. 496). Subsequently, other studies have focused on the issue of core and peripheral areas of electoral support for the political parties from the perspective of individual regions (Plešivčák, 2011), and on issues of political behaviour in urban and rural areas (Plešivčák, 2014). Also, after the success of the far-right K-LSNS, led by Marian Kotleba, at the regional and national levels, many studies have been devoted to this phenomenon (see Bahna & Zagrapan, 2017; Gyárfášová & Slosiarik, 2016; Gregor, 2015; Kevický, 2021b, 2024; Kluknavská & Smolík, 2016; Voda et al., 2022). In this regard, Kevický (2024) has argued that far-right parties in Slovakia (and the Czech Republic) have strong support in 'left-behind' regions and peripheral rural areas, and weak support in and around the largest cities.

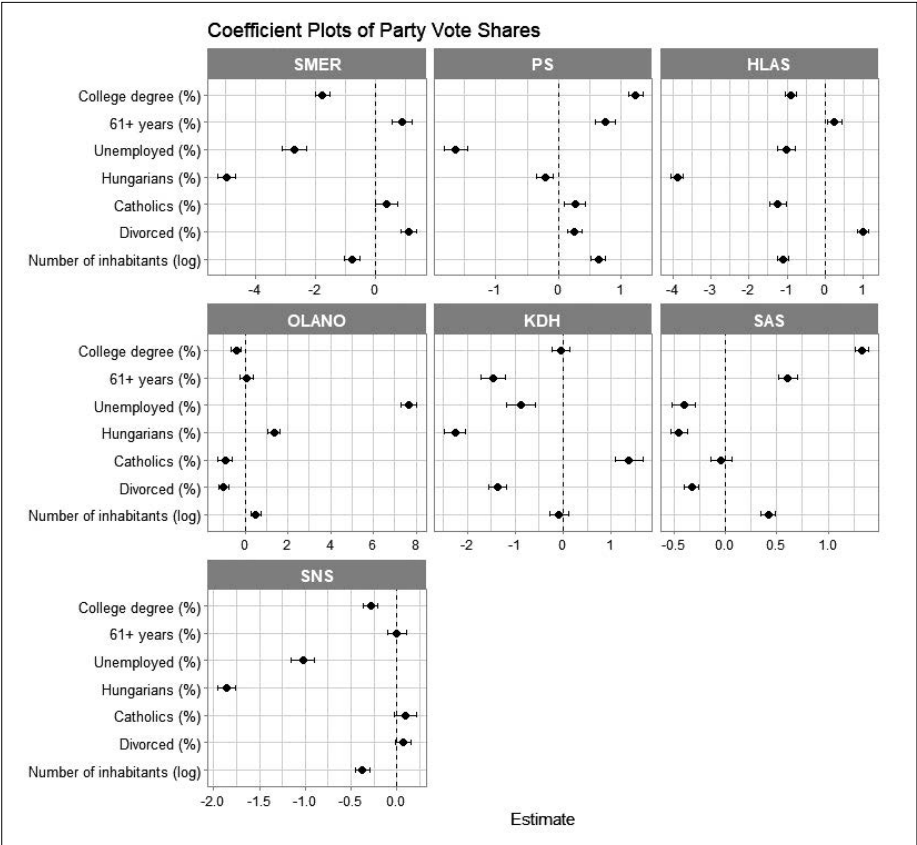
Regarding the 2020 parliamentary elections, several important findings have been published. First, Lysek et al. (2020a) argue that the decline of traditional left-wing parties in Slovakia is linked not only to the rise of right-wing nationalist parties but, more significantly, to the gains made by the 'populists of the political centre', represented by Matovič's OĽaNO. The success of OĽaNO in 2020 owed much to the crafting of an anti-corruption appeal combined with an effective campaign in which the party was able to mobilize by far the largest group of non-voters (Haughton, Rybář, & Deegan-Krause, 2022; Lysek et al., 2020a, p. 287). Thus, the 2020 elections show that Slovakia is an internally heterogeneous country, where voting patterns vary not only between the western and eastern parts of the country but also between districts within the same geographic region. This indicates that Slovak voting patterns are more complex and extend beyond the typical urban-rural and centre-periphery divides (Lysek et al., 2020a).

In light of the above, the 2023 snap elections, which followed the defeat of the long-dominant political force Smer in the previous election, reveal several intriguing findings regarding electoral geography and voter behaviour. Figure 3 presents the results of a regression analysis (OLS) of party vote shares at the aggregate level, depicted as a regression coefficient plot with 95% confidence intervals. It is important to interpret this aggregate-level analysis cautiously due to the potential for ecological fallacy. Generally, the election results are consistent with previous findings concerning individual socio-economic characteristics.

The model for Smer indicates that the party’s typical electorate comprises mainly older voters, the working class, and the middle class, predominantly residing in rural areas (Hlavac, 2016; Lysek et al., 2020a; Zvada, 2023). Despite Smer’s self-identification as a social democratic party, it is challenging to compare it directly with its Western European counterparts or similar parties in the wider V4 region. For instance, De Waele & Soare (2011) categorize Smer as a ‘hybrid or highly specific and localized left party’ within the CEE region.

The election results show that Smer received higher support in municipalities with a lower proportion of college graduates (and a higher proportion of individuals with lower education levels), a higher divorce rate, and a larger elderly population. In some regions, unemployment is positively correlated with Smer’s vote share, though this trend varies across the country, particularly in the south, where there is a significant Hungarian minority and higher unemployment rates.

Figure 2:  
Regression models explaining the vote share for successful parties in the 2023 elections



Note: Number of cases 2969. Models statistics: Smer (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.398$ ), PS (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.682$ ), Hlas (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.516$ ), OLANO (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.569$ ), KDH (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.338$ ), SaS (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.775$ ), SNS (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.462$ ). Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via ggplot and broom packages in R. Weighed by the population. Data source: Slovak Statistical Office. Source: The authors.

The model suggests that in the context of unemployment, voters tended to favour the former coalition leader, OĽaNO, over Smer as the party capable of best addressing unemployment and social issues. This recurring trend from previous elections can be attributed to two factors. First, the unemployed group may have lost trust in Smer's social policies during the 2012-2020 period, which Rossi (2020) describes as marked by 'endemic corruption, political mismanagement, and irresponsible leadership'. Second, the radicalization of Smer's rhetoric during its time in opposition, particularly its law-and-order focus, may have alienated some unemployed voters, including those from the Roma community.

Second in line, the main contender to Smer in 2023, Progressive Slovakia (PS), represented a stark contrast to Fico's party in terms of the socio-demographic characteristics of its voters. Led by Michal Šimečka, PS defined itself as a 'political movement aimed at offering progressive solutions to social problems and uniting people who seek to bring about social change', with core values centred on 'progress, freedom, and equality' (Progresivne.sk, 2024). In this election, PS presented a gender-balanced candidate list and became the first party in Slovakia to implement the zipper system (see Bakke 2024 in this volume). The electorate of PS is predominantly urban and well-educated, as evidenced by a significant correlation between the proportion of college degrees and the logarithm of the number of inhabitants. In other words, higher proportions of college-educated individuals and larger municipalities are strongly associated with increased vote shares for PS. In this context, PS appeals to an electorate that, over time, has been positively associated with parties like SDL, SDKÚ/SDKÚ-DS, SaS, and Hungarian parties such as SMK and Most-Híd (Madleňák, 2012, pp. 62-63). Despite the fact that this is the first significant success for the party as such and the highest gain for a liberal party in modern Slovak history, it seems that the PS is targeting and will be able to satisfy exactly this type of voter. On the other hand, winning almost 18% of votes, in an election with the third highest turnout since 1993 and the highest turnout since 2002, also shows the hypothetical limits to the electorate that the party is likely to muster in the future if it fails to attract new voters (see below for a discussion about turnout).

Third in line, Hlas, was founded by the 'Pellegrini eleven' after the defeat of Smer in the 2020 elections, following the ongoing conflict within the party between the group of MPs around Fico and the party members united around Pellegrini (Cirhan & Malý, 2024 in this volume 90-113; Zvada, 2023). The party was supposed to be the dark horse of the election, as the polls showed, and it was in the lead for a long time. Initially, Pellegrini railed against Smer and spoke of the impossibility of cooperation. Fico, on the other hand, lashed out at Hlas and the S&D club in the European Parliament, claiming that he and his party were not 'Brussels social democracy' (Hnonline.sk, 2023), which was meant to emphasize the fact that the only defender of Slovak national interests on the left side of the spectrum was only and exclusively the Smer party. The 2023 elections confirmed

that Hlas shares a voter base with its ‘parent’ party. As the model shows, Hlas was thus the most successful party in rural areas; the correlation coefficient indicates a similar direction of association between the two parties, albeit with slightly different magnitudes. The model for Hlas suggests that the party attracted voters from smaller municipalities with relatively better living conditions compared to the more disadvantaged peripheral municipalities. This may mirror the fact that Hlas used slightly more moderate rhetoric and campaigning style than Smer. After the election, the party entered into a coalition with Smer and SNS; some voices speak of the party’s re-absorption into Smer or its gradual marginalization or isolation (Bušíková & Zvada, 2023).

Fourth in line, OLaNO was to become the main vehicle for the changes demanded by voters (see Gyarfášová & Učeň, 2020, pp. 330–331). However, after the chaotic and unstable governance during the polycrisis, which resulted in the departure of coalition partner SaS from the government, the formation of a bureaucratic government appointed by President Čaputová, the split of the movement, and finally the announcement of early elections, OLaNO’s reputation in the eyes of the voters dropped dramatically. OLaNO was probably the main loser in 2023; the party lost the election and its electoral base shrunk significantly since it received about almost a half million votes less than in 2020. The municipalities with the strongest support for OLaNO are those with high unemployment rates. However, OLaNO also gained support in cities, especially in larger housing estates, where it was more successful than the liberal SaS. Other predictors were not strongly associated with the party’s vote share, suggesting its populist, cross-cutting appeal. The strong unemployment variable in the success of the movement can be explained in two ways. First, Matovič and his OLaNO movement co-opted representatives of ethnic minorities – Hungarians and Roma – represented by Magyar Szívek, and Pačivale Roma<sup>3</sup> respectively, who are geographically concentrated in areas with higher unemployment. Secondly, Matovič himself tried to mobilize these voting groups at the last minute through social networks with the help of individual candidates from these minorities, promising to pay 500 euros to anyone who participated in the elections (Grim, 2023). Apart from the fact that this was most likely the main factor that kept Matovič’s movement among the parliamentary parties, the data point to the fading anti-corruption esprit of Matovič’s movement and the great volatility of its voter base, since some who voted for OLaNO in 2020 switched to the PS and SaS parties, but a significant number also switched to Smer or Hlas (Mahdalová & Škop, 2023). Moreover, the mobilization appeal that Matovič and his movement relied on in the 2024 presidential elections proved to be significantly weakened, as the analysis of voter shifts

3 The official name on the party ballot was OĽANO A PRIATELIA: OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA (OLANO), NEZÁVISLÍ KANDIDÁTI (NEKA), NOVA, SLOBODNÍ A ZODPOVEDNÍ, PAČIVALE ROMA, MAGYAR SZÍVEK a Keresztanská unia a ZA LUDÍ.

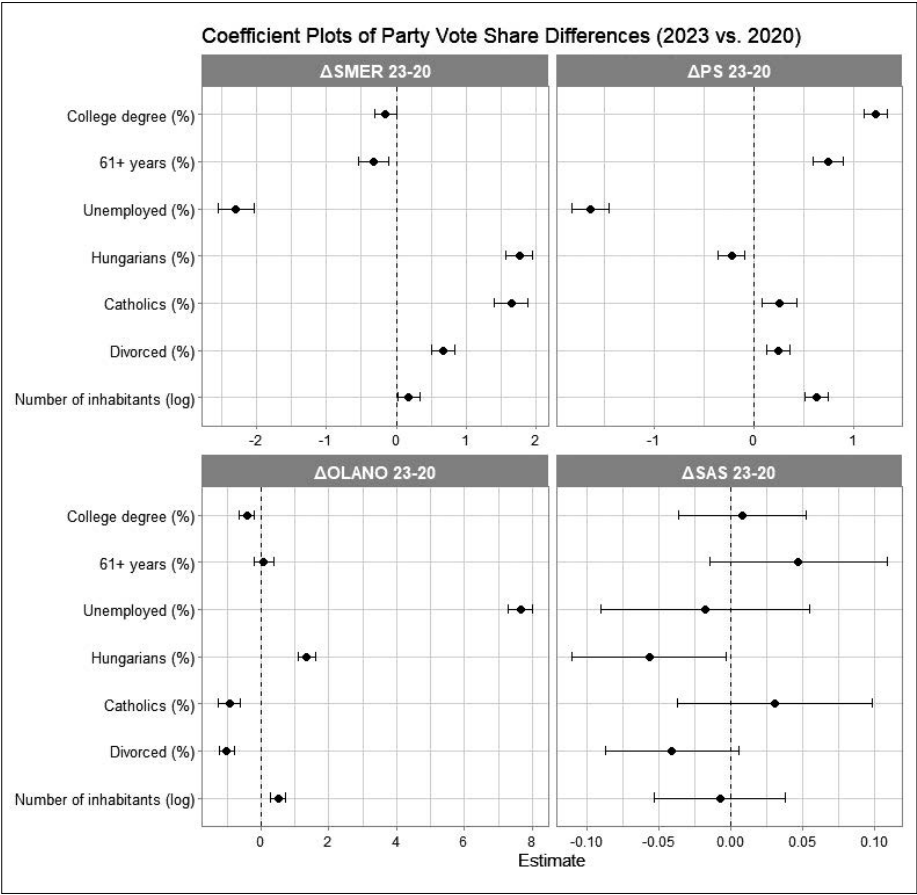
between the first and second rounds of elections shows that up to three-quarters of those who voted for OLaNO in the early parliamentary elections of 2023 did not vote in the second presidential round (Vančo et al., 2024).

The parties that came fifth, sixth and seventh in line received support from their traditional bastions. The Christian Democrats (KDH) traditionally receive the strongest support in municipalities with higher religiosity, measured by the percentage of Catholics (namely the Spiš and Orava regions). Given the relatively even distribution of religiosity across Slovakia, the coefficient is rather small compared to the party's Czech counterpart, the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL). As the above model shows, the two parties, PS and SaS, have almost identical electorates in terms of socio-economic structure; the typical SaS voter being university educated and living in the city. Therefore, on the liberal political spectrum, SaS found itself in the same position as the new Hlas on the left side, when their votes were slowly being absorbed by its parent party, Smer (see Repa, 2023). Analyses of vote shifts between the 2020 and 2023 elections have also shown that some SaS voters actually preferred the progressive variant of the PS and switched to this camp (Mahdalová & Škop, 2023). Given that SaS changed its leadership and failed very badly in the 2024 European Parliament elections, failing to defend its two seats, the future of SaS on the Slovak party map will be interesting to see.

Finally, the nationalist SNS party, which along with KDH is the oldest political party in Slovakia, was able to rely on its traditional electoral bastions in rural areas, particularly in central and northern Slovakia. It is noteworthy, as Haughton et al. (2021) state, that despite periods outside of parliament, the SNS, with its mix of nationalist and populist appeals, has been a prominent fixture on the Slovak political scene for three decades. However, due to its populist appeal, there is no strong link with other social variables, resulting in a relatively even distribution of votes across municipalities with different socioeconomic development levels and demographic composition in terms of socioeconomic status. The party was able to mobilize very strongly at the end of the campaign, outperforming the Republika party by several thousand votes. As an extra-parliamentary party, the SNS's long-term issues were almost all those of the culture wars, especially the anti-gender campaign, the protection of the traditional family, and the protection of national sovereignty against liberal elites and the West as such (Vargovčíková, 2021; Maďarová & Hardoš, 2022), in the same way as other illiberal actors in Slovakia or in the broader V4 region.

The regression analyses examining the change in political outcomes between 2020 and 2023 reveal several significant associations that highlight how demographic and socioeconomic factors influenced the electoral dynamics.

Figure 3:  
Regression models explaining the dynamic change in vote share across 2023 and 2020 elections



Note: Number of cases 2969. Models statistics: ΔSmer 23-20 (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.254$ ), ΔPS 23-20 (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.682$ ), ΔOLANO 23-20 (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.569$ ), ΔSaS 23-20 (Adj.  $R^2 = 0.004$ ). Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via ggplot and broom packages in R. Weighed by the population. The dependent variable is the change in the vote share of a given party (2023 minus 2020 percentage vote share). Data source: Slovak Statistical Office.  
Source: The authors.

Smer increased its vote share in municipalities with higher shares of the divorced and in larger municipalities. As can be seen in the map below, the party lost some support in its traditional bastions of eastern Slovakia, but was able to compensate by mobilizing voters in other traditional bastions of support, in regions such as Kysuce and Považie, and in the rural parts of Trnava and Nitra. Regarding support for Smer over time, Madleňák (2014, p. 239) emphasizes that in the early years of Smer’s existence, the party had balanced electoral gains in

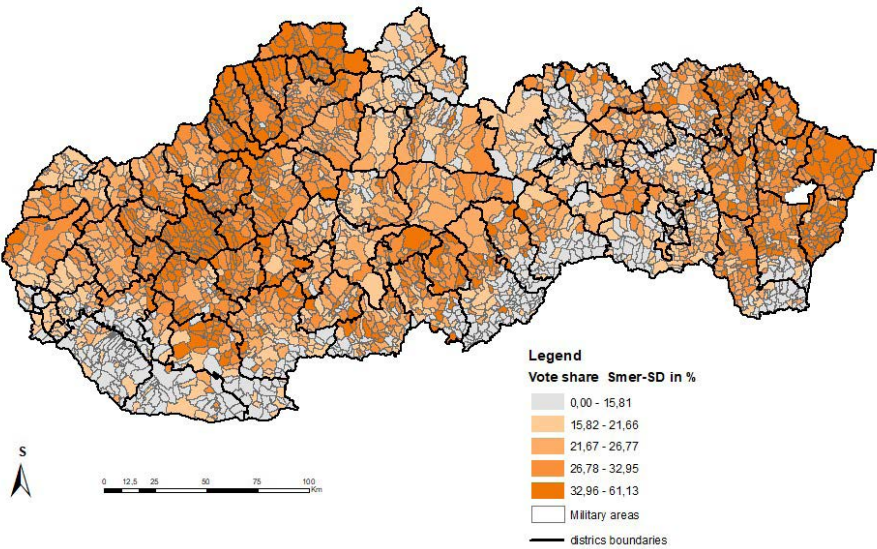


rural and urban areas, but recently Robert Fico’s party has become somewhat more dependent on rural voters. In general, Fico’s party has a long-standing problem with reaching out to left-leaning, university-educated voters, or left-wing elites.

The tentative conclusion from the aggregate level analysis is that the party gained votes in areas atypical for the party. Despite the fact that Fico’s party was not successful in the capital, which has mainly been a centre-right liberal bastion (see Bahna & Majo, 2012), in 2023 Smer managed to defeat the liberal SaS in four out of five districts of Bratislava. However, despite this partial success, the party has long struggled with its inability to reach out to urban (left-wing) elites in general. Moreover, this election showed another trend that is typical for Smer in terms of its electoral support and which also illustrates the urban-rural dynamics in the different regions. While the party won in seven out of eight regions (except the Bratislava region), and succeeded in five of the eight regional cities at the district level, it was only successful in two of the eight largest cities (Trnava and Nitra) at the municipal level. This fact implies a significant dynamic in voting behaviour between regional centres and the peripheral areas where Smer wins support, in all of the seven regions.

Map 3:  
Party vote share for Smer in the 2023 elections

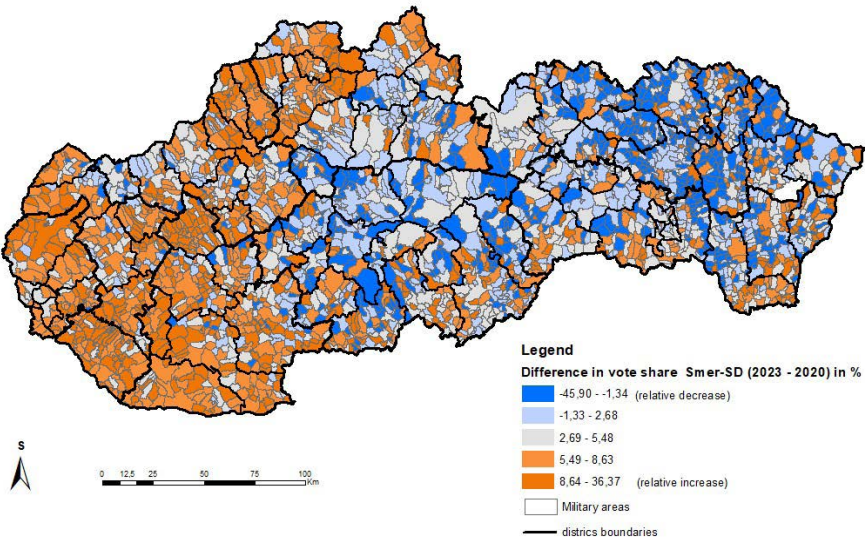
Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023  
Smer-SD support in %



Source: The authors.

Map 4:  
Party vote share change for Smer between the 2020 and 2023 elections

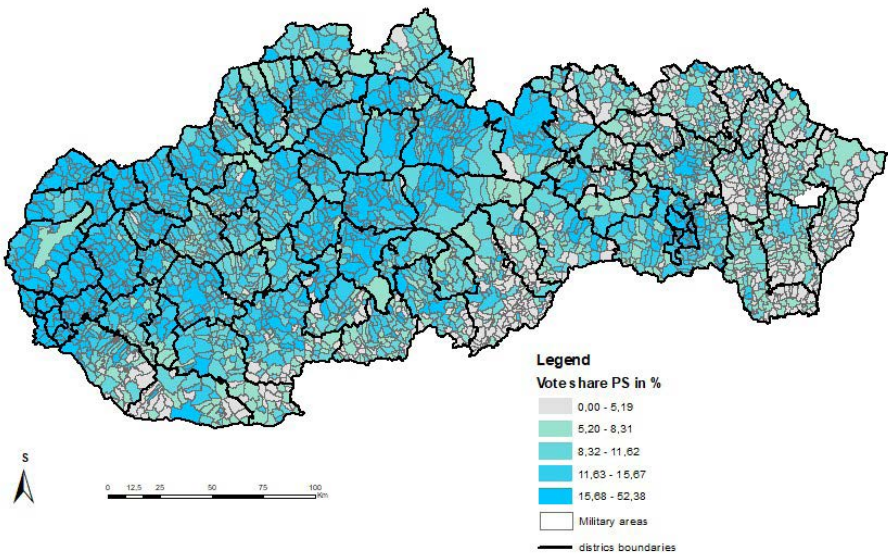
Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023  
Change in Smer-SD support in %



Source: The authors.

Map 5:  
Party vote share for PS in 2023 elections

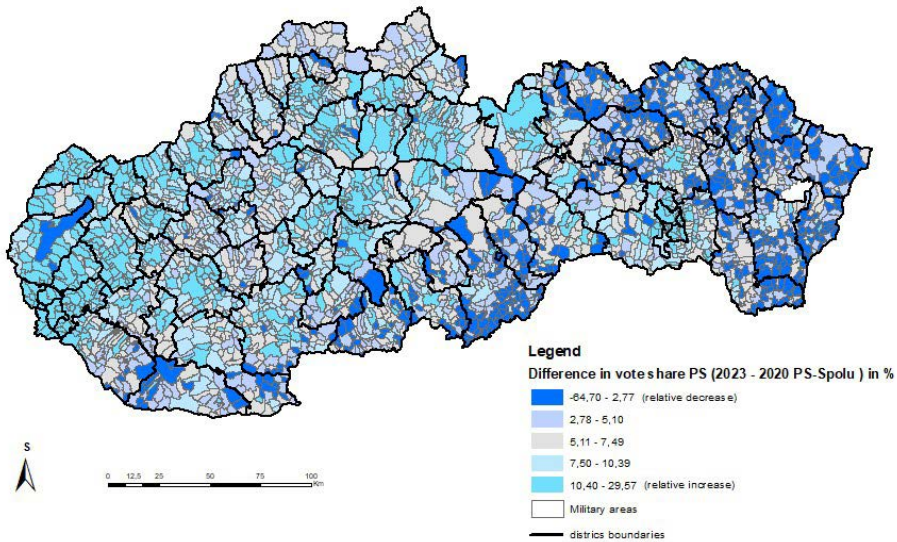
Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023  
PS support in %



Source: The authors.

**Map 6:**  
**Party vote share change for PS between the 2020 and 2023 elections**

Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023  
 Change in PS (and PS-Spolu) support in %



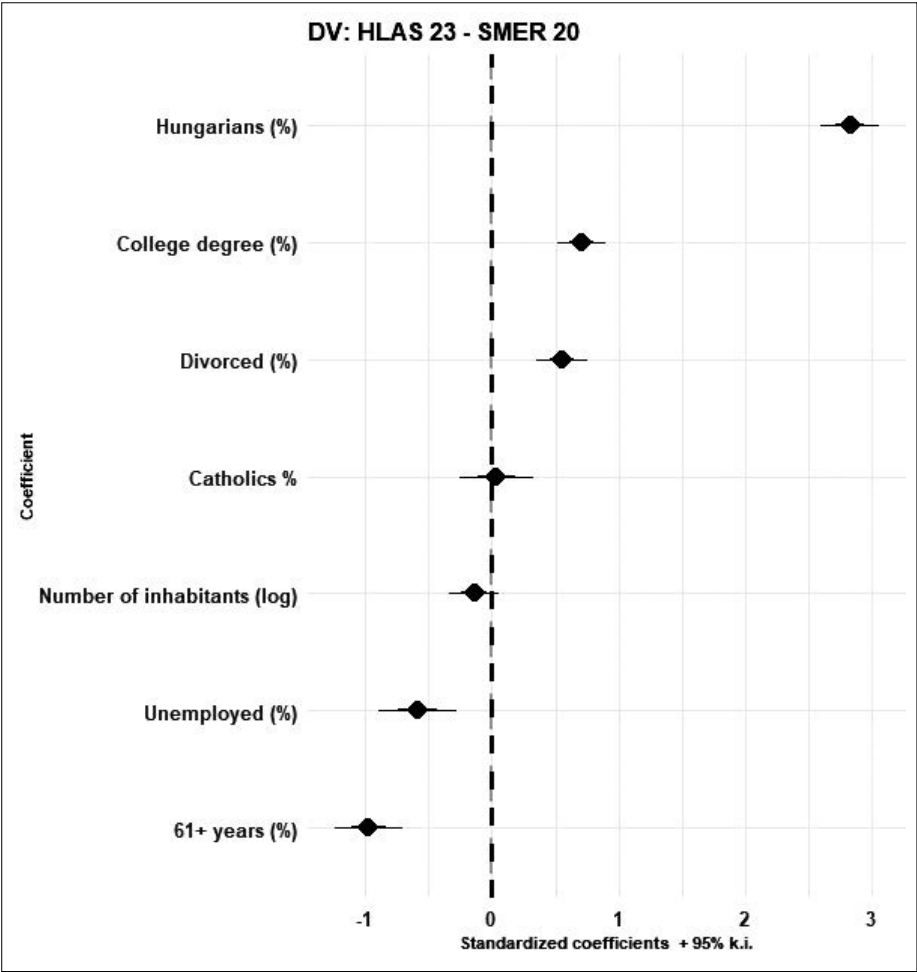
Note: In 2020, the PS ran under Koalicia PS a Spolu.

Source: The authors.

While the turnout level decreased in large urban centres, the vote share for PS increased in those areas in terms of percentages. The increase was in municipalities with higher numbers of the college educated. However, the party lost in the south and the east, mainly in areas with historically higher unemployment rates. By contrast, the populist OLaNO gained in municipalities with higher unemployment and lost in municipalities with higher education. The SaS liberal right-wing party did not experience any significant shift, and sociodemographic factors cannot explain any of the variance in the party's electoral results across the two consecutive elections. SaS has a stable yet very small base.

The third in line, Hlas, cannot be included for comparative analysis because it was established after the 2020 elections. Given its origin in Smer, we can analytically delve into the electoral dynamic of the two parties by analyzing the difference in the vote share for Hlas in 2023 and the Smer vote share in 2020. The model below, presented in the form of a coefficient plot with standardized values, predicts that in comparison to Smer's 2020 level of electoral support, Hlas in 2023 won more votes in regions inhabited by the Hungarian minority and in municipalities with more educated voters and higher divorce rates. On the other hand, Hlas won less support than Smer in regions with higher unemployment and higher numbers of elderly citizens (over age 61).

Figure 4:  
Model explaining the differences in vote share between Hlas in 2023 and Smer in 2020



Note: Number of cases 2969. Models statistics Adj.  $R^2 = 0.226$ . Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via coefplot package in R. Weighed by the population. The dependent variable is the change in the percentage vote share for Hlas in 2023 minus that for Smer in 2020. Data source: Slovak Statistical Office. Source: The authors.

The electoral dynamics of the 2023 elections are interesting in two aspects: while the larger municipalities were demobilized in terms of turnout, both Smer and PS increased their share of votes in larger municipalities and decreased in the east or south. The Hungarian minority supported Hlas in the 2023 elections, and as analysis of the 2024 presidential elections shows (Vančo et al., 2024), those of the Hungarian minority who voted in the second ballot supported Peter Pellegrini more than Ivan Korčok.

To sum up, it seem that the illiberal mobilization may be linked to the dynamic of electoral shifts determined by the different behaviour of various social groups. Moreover, the return of illiberal actors to power in Slovakia seems to be characterized by a surge of votes for conservative or populist left-wing forces in the larger Slovak cities. Although this is not reflected in the turnout, at the individual level we can assume that liberal voters turned out in smaller numbers, while Smer voters may have been better mobilized or some voters may have switched from other populist parties such as OLaNO.

We proceed with some insights on voting behaviour using data from an exit poll conducted by the Focus survey agency. Our focus is on two aspects, namely the timing of voters' decisions and the primary motives behind their electoral choices. Despite signs of increasing polarization within Slovak society, significant segments of voters do not finalize their party choice well ahead of the election. In the questionnaire, exit poll participants responded to the query, 'When did you decide to vote for this political party?', using a Likert scale with four options: today, in the final week before the election, in the final month before the election, and earlier. This question remains consistent across multiple exit polls over time, and we present data from four recent elections.

Table 2:  
Voters' decision timing (in %)

| Time of decision | 2012 | 2016 | 2020 | 2023 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Election day     | 16.8 | 16.7 | 13.7 | 14.5 |
| Final week       | 11.5 | 13.9 | 14.8 | 13.6 |
| Final month      | 11.9 | 14.6 | 18.2 | 14.7 |
| Earlier          | 59.8 | 52.0 | 53.3 | 57.1 |

Source: Focus exit poll (2012; 2016; 2020; 2023).

Table 2 presents the percentages of voters' decision timing. We observe a stable pattern since 2012, with more than half of the electorate deciding well ahead of the election. On the other hand, about 28-30% of voters indicate they make their decision in the final week before the election, with about half of this group deciding on election day. These figures suggest that despite polarization in Slovak society, pre-election mobilization and campaigns can still influence a significant portion of voters. However, the fact that some voters decide in the final days before the election does not necessarily mean they are open to voting for all relevant parties. The exit poll data lack information on which parties these voters seriously considered and decided between, so their scope of decision-making may be between closely related parties only. More on this topic is discussed by Gyarfášová et al. in this special issue.

We move on to the motives behind voters' choices. The exit poll questionnaire offers participants 12 options to indicate the primary reason for supporting their



party choice. For clarity in this paper, we merged nine items related to programmatic and ideological issues into a single category. The remaining three items are of different nature and comprise ‘they have the best leader’, ‘they are the lesser of evils’, and ‘I was afraid they would not get enough votes’. Unlike programmatic issues, these items point to the importance of party leadership, suggest that the decision may be suboptimal, and reveal voters’ aim to strategically vote for a party at risk of falling below the threshold.

Table 3:  
Primary voter motives (row percentages)

| Party     | Ideology | Best leader | Lesser evil | Not enough votes |
|-----------|----------|-------------|-------------|------------------|
| Smer      | 62.6     | <b>20.9</b> | 15.7        | 0.9              |
| PS        | 83.2     | 4.0         | 11.7        | 1.2              |
| Hlas      | 47.1     | <b>33.4</b> | 19.3        | 0.3              |
| OLaNO     | 89.8     | 3.2         | 6.1         | 0.9              |
| KDH       | 70.0     | 2.6         | 23.7        | 3.7              |
| SaS       | 79.0     | 2.5         | 14.2        | 4.4              |
| SNS       | 78.1     | 3.3         | 15.3        | 3.2              |
| Republika | 77.0     | 6.1         | 16.3        | 0.6              |
| Aliancia  | 90.4     | 0.7         | 7.3         | 1.6              |
| Total     | 71.2     | 12.2        | 14.9        | 1.8              |

Source: The authors.

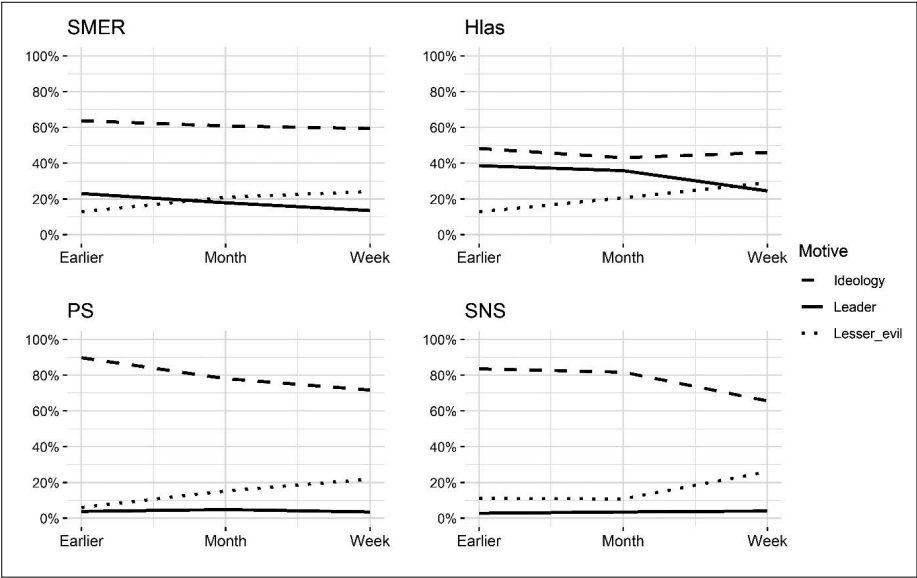
Table 3 displays the motives of voters for all the parties that won more than three per cent of the votes. Across all the parties, the largest group of voters expressed their primary motive to be linked to ideology. However, one in seven voters also mentioned voting for the lesser evil, signalling high distrust of the available political options. Given the large number of competing parties, that fact that nearly 15% of voters selected this option suggests widespread dissatisfaction with domestic politics and its representatives. On the other hand, only 1.8% of voters reported the motive to prevent parties from falling below the threshold. This proportion was substantially higher among voters for the smaller parties oscillating close to the 5% threshold.

Unlike other parties, Smer and Hlas stand apart in terms of the proportion of voters expressing voting for them due to their leaders. While this value ranges between 0.7-6.1% for other parties, more than one fifth of Smer voters and one third of Hlas supporters selected this option (highlighted in bold in the table). However, we are reluctant to associate this outcome with the notion of illiberalism given that other parties with similar visions of governance, such as SNS and Republika, did not deviate in this way from the pro-democratic and liberal parties. Rather than illiberalism, the high share of voters and Smer and Hlas

voters opting for the ‘best leader’ option indicates their strong connection to the respective party leaders, Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini. This supports the findings of Gyárfášová and Hlatký (2023) on the importance of party leaders in Slovak electoral politics.

To inspect this issue in more detail, we compared the voter motives based on the timing of their voting decision. For this purpose, we joined two groups of voters: those who decided either in the final week before the election or on election day. Since other parties besides Smer and Hlas display substantial similarities in terms of the ‘best leader’ motivation for voters, we display only two of them. Namely, PS as a representative of the post-electoral moderate opposition, and SNS as one of the main parties of the far-right camp.

Figure 5:  
Motives of voters according to their decision timing



Note: the motive of saving the party from falling under threshold is not displayed due to its very low incidence.  
Source: The authors.

Figure 5 presents data for the four political parties. First, we observe some similarities. Across all parties, the motive of voting for the ‘lesser evil’ increases as the election approaches, indicating a growing willingness among voters to participate in the election even when choices are not optimal. Additionally, voters for all parties predominantly cite ideological motives, though the proportion varies among them. A stark difference lies in the motive related to party leadership. While for PS and SNS, the proportion for this motive is constantly very

low, the opposite is true for the other two parties. For Smer, the proportion of voters naming the leader as their primary motive declined over time, from over 23% among those who decided well ahead of the elections to less than 14% among those who decided in the final seven days. Hlas' voters followed a similar trend, though their allegiance to their party leader was even higher. More than one third of those who decided to vote for Hlas early mentioned Peter Pellegrini as the best leader. For those that made this decision during the final pre-election week, the number was lower, but still accounted for one in four voters.

These numbers do not necessarily indicate that large numbers of Smer and Hlas voters prefer politics dominated by strong leaders, but they suggest high devotion to these party leaders. This loyalty appears particularly crucial for Hlas, especially in light of Pellegrini's victory in the 2024 presidential elections. As depicted in Figure 5, Pellegrini's strong appeal among Hlas voters is evident among both long-time core supporters and those who decided to support the party shortly before election day. Therefore, for Hlas, whose leader ascended to the presidential office several months after the 2023 general election, this pattern of electoral motives among its supporters appears to be the primary challenge for the upcoming term.

## 5. Conclusion

The 2023 election brought about a significant change not only in how the party system is shaped, but it also affected the general direction of the country, turning it in a illiberal direction.

The months of governance since the election have showed that the warnings of commentators and part of the opposition about potential anti-liberal democratic moves were not a false call. The new government prepared a set of bills limiting NGOs and transforming public service media into state-dependent media. These steps were accompanied by personnel changes of state prosecutors and in the police. In a nutshell, what we have seen so far is very close to what Slovakia experienced in the 1990s under the illiberal governments led by Vladimír Mečiar (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2003) and is reminiscent of the recent developments in Hungary and to some extent in Poland (Bernhard, 2021; Stanley, 2019). The parliamentary election campaign and the election results also influenced the later presidential and European Parliament elections. The leader of Hlas, Peter Pellegrini, was elected President of the Republic as the candidate of the governing coalition (Maďarová, 2024; Zvada, 2024). After that, Smer, Hlas and the populist far-right party Republika won eight of fifteen seats in the European Parliament, three more than the illiberal parties Smer and K-LSNS in the 2019 elections.

Our study explains the patterns of support for political parties in light of the surprising return of Robert Fico and Smer. It seems that after the years of



incompetent governance and political quarrels, part of the electorate simply wanted to return to the old although non-ideal solutions (nevertheless dressed in new illiberal clothes) instead of voting for another new party (especially if we do not treat Hlas as a new party). The rest of this special issue is dedicated to a detailed analysis of selected issues and topics that framed the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections.

The special issue opens with Elisabeth Bakke's article focusing on candidate selection within Slovak political parties. Bakke analyses the characteristics of candidates compared to their electorate, examining so-called social biases in party-voter representation. The article shows the crucial role of party elites in candidate nomination processes and the only limited influence of voters. However, in Slovakia the elites bias is to some extent corrected by preferential voting, especially in the case of smaller political parties.

Olga Gyarfášová, Roman Hlatký and Martin Slosiarik (2024) turn their attention to volatility and identify different patterns of electoral volatility in 2023. Based on both aggregate and individual data, they show the trends in volatility, its dynamics, and analyse the reasons behind vote switching. The most important finding points to a highly volatile electorate generally dissatisfied with partisan politics, and thus with only a limited number of identifiers. Consequently, the continued instability of Slovak party politics is one of the likeliest future scenarios.

The contribution by Tomáš Čirhan and Michal Malý (2024) is closely linked to the topic of volatility. They analyse new breakaway parties, whose rise (and fall) has been one of the most defining features of instability in the Slovak party system. With a primary focus on the party organization, Čirhan and Malý point to a trend towards more transparent intraparty processes in new breakaway parties compared to their parent parties, combined with limited inclusiveness in terms of candidate selection. The results of their study indicate that new breakaway parties do not seem to be repairing the damaged party-society linkages in Slovakia.

Pavel Hynčica and Daniel Šárovec (2024) examine Hlas, one of the new breakaway parties. Their contribution provides a complex analysis including the emergence of the party, its ideological orientation and position within the Slovak party system. Last but not least, they explain the dynamics of the electoral support of one of the most successful political parties in the 2023 general election.

In the last contribution, Veronika Bundzíková and Denis Janšta (2024) discuss the foreign policy orientation of two of the governing parties, Smer and SNS. Foreign policy in general, and attitudes towards Russia and the war in Ukraine in particular, has become one of the most important divides structuring party competition. Using data from the online communications of the two parties, Bundzíková and Janšta show the importance of anti-Westernism, the call for multipolarity in foreign policy, and the appeal for a 'restoration' of sovereign foreign policy.

All in all, the 2023 general elections brought about two major interrelated outcomes. First, the high level of electoral volatility confirmed what can be la-

belled as ‘continuity in discontinuity’: significant increase in support for some parties and decrease in support for others including (former) challenger parties (Sme Rodina) and one of the oldest parties in the system (KDH). Second, the election confirmed the strong position of illiberal, right-wing authoritarian (or even far-right) parties, including the return to power of Smer and SNS. Consequently, most of the party system is built around political parties – and recent events seem to confirm it – that raise questions about the future development of Slovak democracy.

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