Slovakia's 2023 Elections: Framing of Foreign Policy Preferences by Populists[1]

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Abstract

In the Slovak 2023 general election, foreign policy was of importance, as parties were divided along the pro-Western and pro-Russian fault line. Our paper analyses how the parties Smer-SD and SNS, major critics of the previous government and then-current coalition members, framed foreign policy issues and events during the election campaign. We employ a framework analysis method to identify the main foreign policy-related themes of Smer-SD and SNS and how they framed them. Our dataset consists of 145 posts published online by the parties. Our analysis reveals that the main pre-election topics were: the orientation of Slovak foreign policy, attitudes towards the West, and relations with Russia and Ukraine. The parties' populism was manifested in the framing of their visions of Slovak foreign policy. Smer-SD and SNS shared with other European populists anti-Westernism, the call for multipolarity and a sovereign foreign policy. However, the historical context of both parties reveals that in spite of the populist framing of foreign relations, their government will probably not lead to a turnaround in Slovak foreign policy.

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1. Introduction

Slovak general election campaigns tend to be invaded by rhetoric based on populist-nationalist demagogy (Szomolányi & Gál, 2016), and the one in September 2023 was no exception. Surprisingly, a great deal of attention was given to the future orientation of Slovak foreign policy, mainly because the parties appeared divided along a pro-Western and pro-Russian fault line. The election took place amid a society polarized on the foreign policy question; for example, trust in NATO has been declining for some time in spite of Russia attacking Slovakia's neighbour (Globsec, 2023a). Depending on the election winner, a possible shift in Slovakia's foreign policy direction was prophesied (Coakley, 2023).

Róbert Fico, Slovakia's former prime minister and the eventual election winner, is known for conducting a two-faced foreign policy: a radical stance for the domestic scene and a compliant one for its foreign partners (Tarnok, 2023). In recent years, his party Smer – Sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD) has exemplified a mainstream party adopting the kind of populist rhetoric that once had been taboo (Balfour, 2016). Its swing to the right raised concerns that Slovakia's pro-Western foreign orientation might alter once Fico formed a government. Such a development would only deepen the existing disunity in the Visegrad region.

Our paper explores which foreign policy-related events Smer-SD and Slovenská národná strana (SNS) highlighted during the campaign period and how they framed them. These parties became coalition partners after the 2023 elections. While our paper does not explore whether there was a genuine shift in foreign policy after the elections, we believe it is essential to shed light on the expressed foreign policy preferences of the main political actors, as these have a tangible impact on the potential re-formulation of Slovak foreign policy. This is particularly important since, as our paper demonstrates, these parties have a history of breaking with the pro-Western orientation and expressing sympathies towards the Russian regime. This history makes them suitable cases for our analysis.

The sharp anti-Western rhetoric deployed by Smer-SD and SNS has also been observed among other populist parties (Gressel, 2017). We acknowledge that this may only be a rhetorical strategy for the pre-election battle, which may not affect foreign policy in the long run. Like other populists, Smer-SD and SNS face the challenge of continuing to mobilize their supporters once in power (Destradi, Plagemann, & Taş, 2022). Overall, our paper contributes to the research on European populists and their positions on foreign policy. Looking ahead, our interpretation could be further developed to compare the populist framing of foreign policy during the campaign and the actual politicization of foreign policy once in office.

2. Populism and foreign policy

Populism research has been in the spotlight for years, and the success of populists in many countries has only intensified this trend (Hunger & Paxton, 2022). However, the popularity of the concept has turned it into a buzzword with a pejorative connotation, or even as an antonym to liberal democracy (Aslanidis, 2017). Consequently, the conduct and preferences of populists regarding foreign policy are receiving increased scrutiny (see, for example, Giurlando & Wajner, 2023; Wojczewski, 2023; Kane & McCulloch, 2017). From a European perspective, this scrutiny is due to concerns that with populists in power, the unity of the European Union's foreign policy may crumble, and relations with the USA, Russia, or China may take different directions (Destradi, Cadier, & Plagemann, 2021).

Independently of how we approach the conceptualization of populism – whether as Mudde's (2004) thin ideology, a discourse (Stavrakakis, 2004), a political style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), or a political strategy (Weyland, 2013) – 'the people' lie at its heart (Bennett, 2019). Populists claim to speak for ordinary people, who, they argue, are overlooked by their governments, even when they represent a majority. By positioning themselves as the alleged representatives of 'the people', populists enhance their image of legitimacy and democracy. The identity of 'the people' is determined by who is ostracized from this group and vilified. In other words, the inclusive process of constructing 'the people' is simultaneously accompanied by the exclusion of their antagonists (Urbinati, 2019). Katsambekis (2022) points out that belonging to 'the people' is built on pluralistic unity rather than homogeneity.

To summarize, the binary and moralistic depiction of society as being divided between the good people and the immoral elite is one of the key characteristics of populism (Mudde, 2004). The polarization follows an up-down line, with 'the people' representing the underdog, while the establishment is seen as superior. It is not only the political establishment that usually comes under fire from populists but also the mainstream values and other elites in the media, culture, and academia (Canovan, 1999). Nevertheless, the fault line between the opposing groups does not have to originate solely in morality; the groups may also be opposed due to competing ideologies, values or socio-economic interests (Katsambekis, 2022).

The thin ideology approach suggests that populism attaches itself to a fully-fledged ideology (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2021). Given the strong position of populist radical right parties in Europe today, populism is often conflated with one of the right's key characteristics – nationalism. Indeed, as Brubaker (2020) argues, populism and nationalism are 'intersecting and mutually implicated though not fully overlapping field of phenomena'. When we shift our focus to the interstate level, populists may refer to 'the nation' as an embodiment of 'the

people' and demarcate it against other states or groups. In this way, a horizontal differentiation between in-groups and out-groups is established.

Moreover, populists often blur the lines between the intrastate and interstate levels when constructing their antagonists. As de Cleen (2019) notes, radical right populists denounce domestic elites for serving the external multiculturalist and globalist ideologies or an international elite. On the other hand, if their ideology is leftist, they may criticize elites for serving neoliberalism. Anastasiou (2019) explains that to overcome the internal division between 'the people' and 'the elite' when referring to 'the nation', populists equate internal enemies with external ones.

Especially in the era of globalization and amid various crises emanating abroad, populist parties are mobilizing against the alleged external pressure exerted on their nations (Chryssogelos, 2017). To combat the perceived erosion of national sovereignty, populists view a revision of established foreign policy as both a remedy and a means to mobilize followers. As Jenne (2021) illustrates, populists may renounce traditional allies and supranational organizations due to their perceived connection with the establishment. This claim is further supported by Plagemann and Destradi (2020), who find that populists' foreign policy agendas tend to diversify international relations.

Among populists from former communist countries, von Beyme (2018) observes a unique tendency towards nationalism and authoritarianism, as they perceive their states to be squeezed between two competing superpowers. Their appeals often focus on demanding national sovereignty or rejecting any ethnic-cultural influences on the nation (de Cleen, 2017). Slovakia is particularly at risk of falling prey to populism in the foreign policy domain, as no shared sense of belonging has been established among Slovaks (Ušiak, 2018). Consequently, populists may capitalize on the discontent of those disappointed with the post-Cold War order, denationalization, or international crises. Instead, they promote a vision of foreign policy that opposes the vision of the elites (Giurlando, 2021), rooted in anti-USA and anti-EU sentiments (Balfour, 2016; Drezner, 2017).

3. The transformation of Smer-SD and its approach to foreign policy

Smer-SD entered the 2023 election campaign with rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing political opponents and spreading doubts within society. Fico employed a tactic similar to that of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán to appeal to nationalist, anti-Western and pro-Russian voters: the use of conspiracies (Plenta, 2020). The pro Euro-Atlantic government and President Čaputová became targets of Smer's anti-American assaults. Čaputová was labelled an 'American agent', and her links

to NGOs were highlighted (Pravda, 2023). Štibraná (2023) traces the roots of Fico's shift towards a more populist and radical stance to the period following the protests triggered by the murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová. The upheaval led Fico to step down from the prime ministerial post in 2018. Another major blow came in 2020 with an internal split in Smer-SD: Peter Pellegrini, who had replaced Fico as Prime Minister in 2018, along with some party members, left Smer-SD to found Hlas-Sociálna demokracia (Hlas-SD). This split resulted in two parties with similar value orientations, leading to a decline in Smer's popularity (Sme, 2023).

To stop its decline, Smer rebranded itself as Slovak Social Democracy and began appealing to a more nationally oriented voter base seeking a more sovereign foreign policy. The party's rhetoric grew sharper, frequently employing conspiracies and exploiting the polarization of Slovak society. Despite its leftist and anti-fascist orientation, Smer-SD began flirting with far-right sympathizers and spreading disinformation, particularly during the COVID-19 epidemic (Mesežnikov, 2020). Additionally, Fico intensified his verbal assaults on George Soros, Brussels, and the United States (Štibraná, 2023).

Nevertheless, Fico had flirted with an anti-Western foreign policy even prior to the 2023 elections. Since the party's establishment in 1999, the nationalist element has been strongly influential, despite its officially left-wing orientation (Marušiak, 2006). Already the first Smer government formed in 2006[1] made an effort to move away from what was perceived as a one-sided, pro-American foreign policy and insufficient promotion of national interests (Marušiak, Bates, Melišová, & Duleba, 2006). The coalition with nationalists contributed to the radicalization of Smer's rhetoric. Some SNS voters even switched allegiance and supported Smer-SD in the 2012 election (Pytlas & Kossack, 2015; Spáč, 2014).

When Slovakia's membership in Euro-Atlantic structures was under consideration, Smer supported the idea of joining the EU. However, the party was more reserved about NATO membership, particularly regarding NATO's policy towards Yugoslavia (Kopeček, 2007). Smer has always pragmatically adapted its policies to reflect the prevailing moods in society, often at the expense of a consistent ideological stance. Smer's foreign policy can be described as dual-faced and pragmatic. While the party generally complied with the commitments arising from NATO and EU membership, long-term data reveal that Smer's rhetoric towards Euro-Atlantic structures has been more lukewarm than its official proclamations would suggest (Zvada, 2023).

One way Smer maintained a delicate balance was by nominating pro-Western politicians to key posts. For example, during Smer's first coalition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tempered the statements of government officials and promoted a Euro-Atlantic foreign policy. Similarly, in 2016, Smer formed an unlikely coalition with Slovak nationalists and the Hungarian party Most-Híd, framing it as a necessary 'safety net against extremism' (Marušiak, 2021). To maintain government unity, Fico repeatedly declared that Slovakia had no alternative but

to belong to the core of the EU (Úrad vlády, 2017). In 2017, Fico likened Slovakia to a pro-European island in the middle of Europe in a joint proclamation with the President and the Speaker of parliament (Bútora, 2017). Yet, considering the immigration crisis, many populist and radical right parties in the Visegrad region intensified their criticism of the EU (Stojarová, 2018). In the case of Smer-SD, the trend of de-Europeanization began when the party started calling for the building of a 'Slovak, not Brussels social democracy' with the aim of defining itself against the politics of European socialists (Marušiak, 2021).

Even though Fico rejected the annexation of Crimea, likening it to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Úrad vlády, 2014), the crisis was a clear example of Smer's conciliatory stance towards Russia. Smer framed the situation as a geopolitical conflict between major powers. Fico also warned of the risks of Ukraine's potential NATO membership, contrary to his government's official foreign policy stance (MZVaEZ, 2014; Fico, 2014a). Firstly, this can be attributed to Smer's dual-faced foreign policy, which sought to appease the pro-Russian sentiment present in part of Slovak society. Secondly, it aligned with the party's attempt to pursue a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy. Lastly, Fico's reserved stance towards Ukraine was influenced by his own negative personal experiences with Ukrainian representatives during the 2009 energy crisis (Politico, 2023).

Fico has declared that he perceives the four cardinal points of the compass and has advocated for strengthening relations with non-Western states (Katuška, 2023). Regarding the Crimea crisis, he claimed that Slovakia was indirectly drawn into the conflict due to the imposed anti-Russian sanctions. While Smer-SD never vetoed the adoption of sanctions at the EU level (Fico, 2014b), they were described as ineffective and damaging to Slovakia's interests. The discourse on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further reflected Smer's increasing radicalization. Alongside far-right parties, Smer echoed Russian propaganda, simultaneously justifying the invasion and promoting anti-NATO sentiments (Lintner et al., 2023).

4. The transformation of SNS and its approach to foreign policy

In the 2023 election campaign, the face of SNS' chairman, Andrej Danko, could be seen on billboards with slogans like: 'We will stop liberalism together' (Godársky, 2023). Based on exit polls, SNS was balancing months before the election on the edge of 5%. A competing far-right political movement, Republika, seemed to have better chances of winning seats in parliament. These two parties even accused each other of dividing the pro-nationalist vote (Struhárňanská, 2023).

SNS received 5.62% of the vote in October and secured seats, while Republika did not. What contributed to the surprising comeback of SNS was that it profited from attracting candidates from smaller parties to its candidate list. Even though

the party names Life – National Party (Život – národná strana), Slovak Patriot (Slovenský patriot), and National Coalition/Independent Candidates (Národná koalícia/Nezávislí kandidáti) are not widely known, SNS' popularity rose slightly after announcing its final candidate list in June 2023. The image of cooperation among the parties might have been an apt publicity stunt (Majerčínová, 2023).

Additionally, SNS stressed that it could build a stable coalition with Smer-SD. In the end, voters might have opted for an established party that had a higher coalition potential and was not labelled by the public as extremist. Finally, some of Danko's new political allies were social media stars, or had built their names in fringe, alternative media. For example, the former news presenter Martina Šimkovičová became the face of Slovan TV, which has given space to personalities criticizing the anti-Covid measures, supporting Ukraine, and propagating pro-Russian sentiments (Kyseľ, 2023; O médiách, 2023). The positive election result for SNS caused worries that the party's pro-Russian sympathies had not faded away and that relations with Russia might actually thaw once the new government took office.

A part of Slovakia's population still remembers well the era of Ján Slota's chairmanship of SNS. In the 1990's, the party openly coquetted with right-wing extremism, demonstrated features of semi-authoritarianism, racism, and xenophobia (Von Beyme, 2015) and spread hate-inciting rhetoric against minorities (Puskásová, 2009). The signature characteristic of Slota's SNS was anti-Hungarian rhetoric, but this agenda slowly lost its appeal in the eyes of voters (Smolík, 2013). Even years later when Smer-SD was building its first coalition, it was discouraged by the EU from inviting SNS as a coalition partner because it was perceived as extremist (Karabová & Filipec, 2018).

SNS used to be staunch opponent of Slovakia joining NATO and called for Slovakia's neutrality instead (Konečný & Zetocha, 2005). Slota framed the organization as a globalist-led project, membership in which might destroy Slovak society (Slota, 2001). SNS kept undermining the Euro-Atlantic orientation by framing Russia as a key economic partner for Slovakia (Slota, 2011). Some key features of SNS' foreign policy orientation, specifically the expressing of sympathies towards Russia, did not change even after Andrej Danko was elected chairman in 2012.

As Danko summarized during his speech in the Russian Duma in 2019: 'Europe needs Russia' (State Duma, 2019). SNS strongly doubted the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed on Russia, labelling them useless and only strengthening the Russian economy (Danko, 2019). On another occasion, Danko emphasized Russian and Slovak cultural closeness and pan-Slavic unity (Geist, 2017). He also claimed that small nations like Slovakia need superpowers' help to keep the peace, which referred to Russia (Kern & Tóda, 2017).

Years ago, Danko showed insight as he declared that various populists and quasi-nationalists are drawn to nationalism-related topics and exploit them (Danko, 2012). This trend became apparent in the 2016 national election that took

place in the shadow of the refugee crisis, whereby the transformation of Smer-SD is a clear example. The following elections only confirmed this trend: the 2020 election was a tug-of-war for votes among populist parties (Havlík et al., 2020). Danko tried winning the attention of new voters by giving some alternative media interviews, hence breaking the taboo of not granting these actors legitimacy. Even though SNS presented itself as the traditional face of the Slovak nationalist scene, the party failed with such rhetoric that time (Haughton, Rybář, & Deegan-Krause, 2022). As noted above, the question of who was the genuine representative of Slovak nationalism, was of key importance in the early 2023 election, too.

5. Methodology

Due to the suspected shift away from a pro-Western foreign policy orientation by Smer-SD and SNS, this paper examines the foreign policy related events these parties highlighted in their election campaigns and how they framed them. We address the following questions: What foreign policy related events and issues were framed during the campaign period by Smer-SD and SNS? How did the parties interpret these events and issues?

The possibility of including the Republika party in this study was also considered but ruled out due to its low election result (4.75%). On the other hand, both Smer-SD and SNS have had a tangible impact on the formulation of foreign policy post-election. Based on the election results, it would seem plausible to include the remaining coalition partner Hlas-SD. Although the subsequent presidential campaign showed that Peter Pellegrini was embracing dovish rhetoric towards Russia (Cameron, 2024), we decided to build our analysis only on parties with a proven history of breaking from the pro-Western orientation of Slovak foreign policy.

We collected data generated by the parties during the campaign period, which began on 9 June 2023, and lasted until the moratorium was introduced at midnight on 29 September 2023. Our dataset includes texts shared by Smer-SD and SNS through their official party webpages or the personal pages of their politicians on Facebook. We focused exclusively on posts that explicitly addressed foreign policy, relations with other states, or interactions with supranational political actors.

Figure 1:
Number of posts in the dataset per party

Party	Number of posts in dataset
Smer-SD webpage	63 posts
SNS - SNS webpage - Andrej Danko - Tomáš Taraba - Rudolf Huliak	82 posts - 32 posts - 26 posts FB page) - 21 posts FB page) - 3 posts FB page)

Source: The authors.

The collected data were analysed using framework analysis, a method developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). This method is well suited to the contextual type of research questions addressed in our paper. Framework analysis is effective for identifying and interpreting the parties' perspectives on foreign policy-related events, and its structured nature allows for cross-case comparison (Goldsmith, 2021). By organizing the topics the parties addressed and how they framed them, this method enabled us to assess whether their campaigns were driven by populism. The framing concept is well-established in political science and, specifically, in research on political communication (Hertog & McLeod, 2008). Frames represent the ways that politicians or other actors select and construct information, as their statements are not mere reflections of reality (Matthes, 2011; Entman, 1993). Analysing communication frames is approachable useful method for researching populism (Osuna, 2021; Aslanidis, 2015).

As previously mentioned, our paper does not adopt a specific approach to populism. However, various approaches collectively identify some essential features of this phenomenon. In analysing our data, we used these features (outlined in the theoretical section above) as benchmarks against which our cases were compared. Different approaches to populism need not be mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they can complement each other. Therefore, our approach of analysing frames does not conflict with either the thin ideology approach or the discourse approach. Even populist rhetoric requires some ideological foundation shared by the people whom populists claim to represent (Osuna, 2021). As Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2021) note, the thin ideology approach alone may not adequately address 'grey zone' cases, such as mainstream parties adopting nativist and populist rhetoric. Conversely, examining populism through the lens of language and rhetoric accounts for its often contradictory and chameleonic nature (Norris, 2020). In summary, combining these approaches may offer a more comprehensive understanding.

Another advantage of framework analysis is its suitability for both deductive and inductive coding (Parkinson et al., 2016). We had initial ideas about which foreign policy topics were of interest to Smer-SD and SNS, such as the war in

Ukraine and energy security. However, we also aimed to explore additional topics that the analysis highlighted as important. In our analysis, we followed the five stages recommended by Ritchie and Spencer (1994):

- Familiarization: All of the texts were uploaded to MAXQDA, software for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. We began with repeated reading of the materials to gain a preliminary impression of the main themes.
- Identifying a thematic framework: Patterns within the data were identified and given the first descriptive labels to create indexes and themes.
- Indexing: The dataset was labelled with indexes and themes. The framework was refined to fit the data.
- Charting: Data for both parties was represented in a chart to visualize it most suitably.
- Mapping and interpretation: The interpretation of the foreign policy-related issues addressed by Smer-SD and SNS and how the parties framed them was written.

6. Interpretation: Smer-SD's election campaign and the question of foreign policy

Compared to previous election cycles, in 2023 Smer-SD presented a detailed and distinct pre-election programme titled 'Return of Sovereignty to Slovak Foreign Policy' (Smer, 2023). The party emphasized the need to restore sovereignty, which it claimed was undermined by the former pro-Western government. Smer-SD's criticism of the previous government focused on its inability to handle crises, its abandonment of national interests, and its perceived submission to external actors and opinions.

One of the pillars of Slovak foreign policy should be sovereignty, which in this context was presented as a critique of or differentiation from the current policies of the EU and NATO. However, this critique was not directed at the organizations as such, unless it aligned with the party's rhetoric. In this regard, Smer-SD's style of foreign policy resembled that of Hungary under the Fidesz government and, to some extent, Poland under the PiS government. Both countries often prioritized national interests over a Europe-wide compromise. In terms of regional politics, Smer-SD advocated for deepening the neighbourhood policy and enhancing the V4 format, despite acknowledging the differing views among member countries on various issues.

The second pillar of Slovak foreign policy should be maintaining a balance. This position extended Smer-SD's previous calls for a balanced foreign policy with regard to all four corners of the world, a stance particularly evident from

2006 to 2010 and somewhat overshadowed by the Europeanization of Slovak foreign policy after 2012. Smer-SD viewed EU membership as irreplaceable and worthy of protection. At the same time, the party identified with some citizens' discontent with the current functioning of the EU (Smer, 2023). Smer-SD advocated for greater strategic autonomy for the EU, especially in relation to the US, and called for a return to the EU's peaceful disposition. Simultaneously, the party emphasized the need for greater respect for nation states, in contrast to the push for deeper federalization.

Smer-SD's stance towards NATO was notably cooler than its position on the EU. While the party did not advocate for deepening relations with NATO, it also did not question Slovakia's membership, acknowledging the country's commitments to the Alliance. To channel the people's sentiments, the party indirectly defended critics of NATO and its policies in the Slovak population.

Figure 2:
Smer's framing of governmental foreign policy

Criticism of (former government's) foreign policy		
Theme	**Framing**	**Data transcript**
Orientation of foreign policy	- incompetence - subservient - limited only to one cardinal point	*- Matovič and Sulík have devastated Slovakia for three years and now Čaputová's clowns brag that they are going to govern but they do nothing, they only deal with NGOs, Roma people, Ukrainians and guns... They do not give a damn about Slovaks - yes, this is chaputovian despair in practice.*
West and Western structures	- government politicians as a tool of foreign interests (USA, NGOs) - an effort to silence opposition (supported by EU/NATO)	*- Dozens of employees of Slovak ministries were recently at a „seminar" in Brussels at NATO, and the event only pretended to be a „seminar", they were openly asking NATO to deal with the elections in Slovakia as soon as possible.* *- The president fears that the new political set-up after the upcoming parliamentary elections may jeopardise the Slovakia's continued support for Ukraine? But why doesn't Zuzana Čaputová look into her own coalition and pro-American backyard? Perhaps she would understand that it is not Russian propaganda but the common sense of the Slovaks that is sounding in the streets. Slovaks are not stupid. And they certainly don't want war, they want peace.*
Relations with Russia/ Conflict in Ukraine	- military involvement in Ukraine - harming Slovakia	*- We have been telling Slovakia for months that our defence forces have basically been destroyed by American stooges like Čaputová, Matovič, Naď and Heger. We have given Ukraine everything.*

Source: The authors.

Smer-SD dedicated a major portion of its programme to the conflict in Ukraine and, indirectly, to the Russian Federation and its relationship with the West. The party supported aid to Ukraine but insisted that it should be exclusively non-military. Within this stance, there were signs of an emphasis on a peaceful

resolution to the conflict, as well as an opportunistic use of 'whataboutism'. Smer-SD equated the conflict in Ukraine with other alleged violations of international law, such as the Kosovo conflict and the USA's invasion of Iraq. Through this 'whataboutism', Smer-SD politicians attempted to create an appearance of balance regarding the policies of major powers. They often employed narratives promoted by Russia, framing them as alternative viewpoints. The conflict in Ukraine was often perceived from a geopolitical perspective as a power struggle where the interests of ordinary people in smaller states were subordinated to the agendas of elites serving foreign interests. The fear of the conflict escalating into a Third World War was also actively stoked, particularly by Juraj Blanár, the current Foreign Affairs Minister, and to a lesser extent, by Marián Kéry.

On the other hand, the programme contained no openly pro-Russian statements. Smer-SD asserted that, despite the situation in Ukraine, its policy would continue to acknowledge the Soviet Union's role in the liberation of Slovakia and rejected the formation of blocs between East and West. In line with the main thesis of its four cardinal points policy, Smer emphasised the need to cultivate relations with China, Vietnam, and, after the end of the conflict in Ukraine, with the Russian Federation. The party presented this balanced foreign policy as a demonstration of Slovakia's sovereignty, but it insisted this would be carried out within the context of EU and NATO membership. However, it remained unclear how the party planned to address potential contradictions that could arise from its interests and those of other EU and NATO countries in relation to third countries.

The analysis of statements revealed that, until around September 2023, there was no major direct criticism of Ukraine. The conflict was mainly discussed in the context of calls for peace, but also in relation to the creation of new blocs. The topic of advocating for peace was often used as a platform to criticize international organizations to which Slovakia belongs. Within the EU, criticism was directed at poor leadership, which, instead of promoting the sovereign interests of the EU and its members, was perceived as blindly pursuing foreign interests (such as those of the USA and the arms lobby) and betraying the historically peaceful nature of the EU.

The role of the USA in the conflict in Ukraine was portrayed somewhat negatively by Smer-SD representatives. The role of the USA was indirectly equated with that of other global powers (including Russia) in Ukraine, even though Smer-SD officially condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Hajčáková, 2022). The Americans were described as have two main goals: seeking to weaken Russia and bring NATO's military infrastructure closer to its borders. Criticism of American policy was often linked to the interests of the arms lobby, which, according to Smer-SD, was using NATO to advance its agenda and draw the EU and nation-states into its plans. The decision of the Slovak governments (2020-2023) to participate in military aid to Ukraine was seen by Smer-SD representatives as evidence of the USA pressuring European allies and the reason for proposed

increased military spending in Slovakia. From Smer-SD's perspective, these governments acted in foreign interests to the detriment of Slovak citizens' interests.

After September 2023, Smer-SD's rhetoric escalated, targeting the Ukrainian government more directly. This shift was a response to the conflict between Ukraine and the Eastern European countries that banned the import of Ukrainian grain. Smer-SD also used this issue to emphasize the importance of the V4 within the European Union and, secondarily, to criticize the post-2020 Slovak governments for downplaying relations within the V4 framework. The grain import affair mainly served as a platform for Fico to question Ukraine's reliability as a partner, referencing negative experiences with Ukraine during the 2009 gas crisis. Statements suggested that Ukraine, despite its declarations, remained an ungrateful actor. This position resonated not only with pro-Russian Slovaks but also with those who may have been critical of Putin's policies while simultaneously opposing aid to Ukraine.

It was the topic of arms (in general, not only concerning arms supplies to Ukraine) that was used by Smer-SD against the government. The party pointed out mainly the decline in Slovakia's defence capability due to the export of weapons from the Slovak army's stockpile. Modernization projects and reforms were ignored or downplayed by pointing out that they were inadequate replacements or expensive, and their purchase suited external actors and would come at the expense of spending for Slovak citizens.

The constant linking of foreign and domestic policy was evidence of a certain prioritization of domestic politics over foreign policy, which may be less important from the point of view of Smer-SD voters. Among the foreign policy issues, the topic that resonated most, apart from the conflict in Ukraine, was criticism of the government's overall foreign policy and of President Čaputová. The pretext for the criticism was rooted in the openly pro-Western position of the government and the active interest in participating in the supply of military materiel, which was framed as a sign of the government's weakness and intransigence. In criticizing President Čaputová, Smer-SD mainly referred to her links to the non-governmental sector, which, following the example of disinformation websites, was purposely linked to her decisions with which the party disagreed. Čaputová was thus portrayed as a tool of foreign interests – NGOs (especially those linked with the person of Soros), or as a minion of the American embassy. The rhetoric aimed to extract political points from the anti-American sentiment in Slovak society, which was cultivated especially by the far right since 2021 in connection with the so-called Defence agreement (Globsec, 2023b).

Figure 3:
Smer's framing of its preferred foreign policy

How foreign policy should be according to Smer SSD		
Theme	**Framing**	**Data transcript**
Orientation of foreign policy	- „another opinion" - return of sovereignty - balance of foreign policy	- Smer-SSD has consistently pursued a sovereign foreign policy during its twelve years in the Slovak government and has protected Slovak national-state interests." "After the parliamentary elections in 2020, sovereignty and the defence of national-state interests ceased to be part of Slovak foreign policy.
West and Western structures	- importance of EU + EU reform - acceptance of obligations towards NATO, - criticism of the aggressive politics of the powers and military-industrial complex	- Smer-SSD is clearly anchored in the EU and NATO, we just have different opinions on the concrete things that the EU/NATO do, because we cannot agree that the peace union, instead of seeking peace, does everything to push weapons on Ukraine. - Do you understand now why no one wants to negotiate peace and an end to the war? What has the arming of Ukraine solved? The only winners in Ukraine are the arms factories in the West and the military-industrial complex in the US, which is fully and visibly controlled by the Biden administration.
Relations with Russia/ Conflict in Ukraine	- no military involvement in Ukraine - looking for conflict solution/pcacc - caution in relation towards Ukraine	- The conflict in Ukraine was caused primarily by NATO and US pressure on Ukraine's membership in NATO. - If Ukraine moves closer to NATO, it will be a major security risk not only for Slovakia, but for the whole EU and I think globally... We need to find a way and an agreement with Russia to strike some kind of balance between the EU and the RF, because this has just kick-started the arms industry. - So far we could only speak from our past experience when Ukraine cut us off from gas because of its conflict with Russia, however their lawsuit against us because of the ban on grain imports to Slovakia is a confirmation of their gross unseriousness and their feeling that they can do anything.

Source: The authors.

In defining itself against the government, there was a certain interpenetration of Smer-SD and the Slovak far-right scene. Smer-SD started to openly defend the so-called different opinion, thus trying to reach not only critics of the government but especially voters who rejected the mainstream and tended towards an alternative. Government activities aimed at combating disinformation and hybrid threats were presented by Smer-SD as an effort to silence the opposition. On the other hand, government politicians and sympathizers often equated critics of the government with supporters of Russia and spreaders of Russian propaganda, which in turn led to the further polarization of society.

To emphasize the connection of the pro-Western government and the President to foreign actors, at the height of the campaign Smer-SD tried to raise the topic of an alleged attempt to manipulate the elections in favour of the government.

After all, the topic did not appeal to the broad masses. After that, Smer-SD tried to follow up on its prior positive experiences with the topic of illegal migration, which it used before the election in 2016. Compared to previous years, however, the topic was overshadowed mainly by events in Ukraine or by domestic factors. The assessment of its impact on Smer-SD's electoral result is questionable. Still, the fact is that it was another of the so-called flagship issues of the far right which the Republika movement wanted to work with. Smer-SD representatives also mentioned the position they had taken in 2015-2016 and, in many ways, acted more credibly and experienced than the politicians from Republika, which may have led some voters to lean towards Smer-SD.

7. Interpretation: SNS' election campaign and the question of foreign policy

As the data for our analysis stem from the campaign period, it is quite expected that SNS would utilize the topic of foreign policy as a means to further polarize the electorate against the then-governing coalition. Therefore, when SNS discussed foreign policy-related questions, it mostly came down to how things are and how they could (and should) be. In other words, the fault line ran between governmental diplomacy and how it could be transformed if SNS were elected. Needless to say, the party was strongly critical of how Slovakia's foreign relations were oriented under Matovič and later governments.

First, the criticism targeted the fundamental basis of Slovak diplomacy: the supremacy of relations with EU and NATO states. Such diplomacy was perceived by SNS as unbalanced and too simple-minded. What they suggested instead was to cooperate with all superpowers, including Russia and China. Such a stance was likely to be hidden behind the phrase: the world has four cardinal points and not only one. The party justified the necessity of maintaining relations with all superpowers by insisting that this approach serves Slovak national interests.

SNS realized that Slovakia had been for years closely linked to Western structures, but in the same breath, it tried to create the illusion that such orientation was intrinsically linked to the then-ruling government. SNS depicted its political opponents from the governing coalition as servile followers of foreign, Western interests. During the Slovak election campaign, it became common to discredit the coalition as servants of foreign embassies or NGOs. Such rhetoric aimed to portray the coalition politicians as not only not serving their nation but also to accuse the West of violating Slovak sovereignty. Nevertheless, a question arose at this point: Who or what fell under the Western label which SNS opposed so strongly?

Noteworthy is that SNS very often used the broad term 'the West' when talking about Slovakia's foreign relations. Depending on the context, the word

could be a generalization for the European part of the former Western bloc or an umbrella term including the Western states allied with NATO or the EU. No matter which, the 'West' label was mostly used in a derogatory way. It was an abstraction and representation of all the wrongdoing not only on the international scene but also for the undesired influence violating the sovereignty of the Slovak Republic. Such phenomena could be but were not limited to immigration, warmongering, insecurity or cultural decadence.

An additional harmful intention is ascribed to the West: SNS stressed in its posts that the West did not treat the Slovak Republic (and most post-communist states) as equal partners. The party even used a parallel comparing former colonies to the Eastern part of Europe, whereby the West kept its slave-master mindset and thought it could exploit the post-communist states. As Slovakia started experiencing problems with illegal immigration during the campaign period, oppositional parties hijacked the topic to incite popular sentiment against the government and the West European states. The colonialism analogy found use in this context, too, as SNS blamed the West for being responsible for the roots of modern illegal immigration. Hence, the nationalists rejected the idea that Slovakia should be held accountable for refusing to share the burden caused by immigration.

This brings us to the first of the Western structures, the European Union. During the election campaign the party criticized the former government for behaving too submissively towards Brussels. SNS had been known for many years for its critical rhetoric about the EU. The party had not changed this view. Even though it did not suggest some radical ideas like a 'Slovexit', it called for the reformation of the Union. There was clear opposition to the idea of delegating political responsibility to the Union. On the other hand, SNS deceived its audience by putting Slovakia into the role of not being able do to anything against dictates imposed by the EU. The European authorities were portrayed in a manner that made them look almost like some illegitimate representatives. If SNS' ideas were to be fulfilled, the EU would have to transform back into a solely economic union. Following the demonization of the West, SNS tried constructing the image that there was a cleavage between western and eastern member states. The party saw proof for this allegation in Brussels' indifference to solving the conflict over Ukrainian grain exports. Due to this, SNS depicted the EU as a hypocritical actor that treated its member states according to a double standard.

It might come as a surprise, but SNS focused more on criticism of the EU than on NATO in its electoral campaign, according to the posts we analysed. This might be surprising since the 'old' SNS used to oppose Slovakia's membership in NATO and the current leadership rejects any military involvement or military supplies given to Ukraine. Similarly, as with the EU, SNS declared that NATO needed to go through reformation. The party saw the future of Slovakia's security tied to other European states, whereby they should ally within a collective security organ to

be independent of the USA. This might come across as comical, especially since SNS spread distrust of the EU.

Given the anti-Americanist discourse that is disseminated in Slovakia, it is only appropriate to investigate how SNS framed relations with the USA during the campaign. Once again, the mentions of the superpower were rather scarce in the analysed posts. Yet, as mentioned before, the umbrella term 'the West' may often substitute for explicit rhetoric about the USA. When SNS mentioned the USA in its posts, it was mostly in connection to the war in Ukraine. The party especially highlighted the arms deals that the USA had closed thanks to the on-going war. Hence, SNS emphasised mainly the USA's lust to wage wars abroad to undermine trust in Slovakia's traditional foreign partner. Plus, President Biden was portrayed by SNS as some puppet master who kept President Zelenskyy in power; once the USA elects another president, Russia may not need to deal with any resistance in the West anymore.

In recent years, SNS has normalized giving interviews to so-called alternative media. These media are accused of disseminating biased information, conspiracies or propaganda. In the 2023 national elections, some candidates who were running for SNS were closely tied to such media. Even though it has not become the party's mainstream yet, the tropes utilized by the disinformation scene were visible in the expressions of SNS party members. Namely, some posts included warnings about the influence exercised on the Slovak political scene by Soros or some NGOs linked to foreign states and the risk that the New World Order will be established. For the future of Slovakia's foreign policy, it might be troubling that current government members are allowing such rhetoric to intrude into the mainstream. Particularly if such news disseminates Russian propaganda without undergoing any fact-checking.

Figure 4:
SNS' framing of governmental policy

Criticism of (former government's) foreign policy		
Theme	**Framing**	**Data transcript**
Orientation of foreign policy	- liberal - limited only to one cardinal point - subservient	- *Liberals are too pro-western and make as if world did not have four cardinal points.* - *If a pronational government ruled here, it would ask the Eurocommission in the first place, how do they dare to recommend something that falls under the sovereign jurisdiction of Slovakia.*
West and Western structures	- violate Slovakia's sovereignity - inferiority of post-communist states - root of all problems	- *Let's not pretend, the same dictate is imposed on Slovakia by Brussels, NATO and the American embassy.* - *This is how Europe looks like when progressive liberals, who want to destroy the Christian identity of European nations, have power. If the West wants to destroy its identity, it 's free to do so, but we cannot be idle and allow this.*
Relations with Russia	- support sanctions imposed on Russia - military involvement in Ukraine	- Slovnaft made more than 1 billion thanks to sanctions imposed on cheap Russian oil. This only proves that various intermediaries from all around the world made hundreds of billions thanks to the stupid anti-Russian sanctions and it has been at the expense of ordinary people. - The result of Čaputová's, Heger's, Kollár's and Naď's foreign policy is that they donated our whole army to Ukraine and Hungarian fighter aircrafts must protect our territory.

Source: The authors.

To summarize, SNS perceived the then-government's foreign policy orientation as insufficient because it relied only on the West. Therefore, during the campaign, the party focused mainly on depicting the Western states and political structures in a bad light. In the analysed campaign posts, the West was not mentioned in any positive way. Hence, SNS may not ask for radical changes in Slovakia's foreign policy openly, but its rhetoric undermines trust in traditional allies. Moreover, the foreign policy agenda was used during the campaign as another issue defining the fault line between the opposition and the then-governing coalition.

Hence, we need to shed light on the other half of the party's interpretation of the issues, namely, how foreign policy should be managed according to SNS. The party formed its main precedence for foreign policy on nationalism. Specifically, the primacy of national interests was always brought up by SNS when the party explained its proposed departure from the long-term approach to Slovak diplomacy. The nationalists used the campaign to boast that they would re-introduce strong foreign policy to return Slovakia to its sovereignty. In their worldview, strong diplomacy means saying 'no' to the West in contrast to the sitting govern-

ment, which was not able to do so. Also, such rhetoric cemented among the SNS voters the feeling that the Western structures were not trustworthy partners.

The phrase about national interests is also presented to support the call for building relations with all superpowers, not only the USA. Concerning SNS, such demands raise worries of Slovakia falling under Russian influence. Especially if we consider the pro-Russian sympathies present in the party since its establishment or Danko's visits to Moscow. In the current context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is alarming when a member of the EU and NATO sends signals that it would like to thaw relations with Russia. However, SNS realized that openly praising Russia would mean crossing a diplomatic line. Therefore, the posts the party and its members published during the election campaign mostly omitted mentioning Russia. In the few cases when the party did so, Russia was mentioned in a neutral or positive connotation. On the other hand, any hint of critique or condemnation of the foreign policy the Russian state was absent.

Renewed relations with Russia were framed as crucial for the well-being of the Slovak nation. Therefore, the party openly stated that after the election, it would like to contribute towards improving cooperation with Russia. One such field was the energy industry. Even though it would violate the policy agreed on by Slovakia and its foreign allies, SNS lobbied for importing cheap Russian oil and gas because Slovaks would benefit from it. Although SNS' campaign posts were careful in expressing sympathies towards Russia straightforwardly, in cases in which it was necessary to stand on one side of the barricade along with its allies, the party pulled out the national interests' card. Hence, the excuses for protecting sovereignty were just calls for political neutrality in disguise.

SNS would even sacrifice Slovakia's involvement in Ukraine to settle disputes with Russia. Due to sharing borders with Ukraine, Slovakia has been quite impacted by the war and its consequences. Since the war erupted, Slovak far-right political actors have been demanding peace in Ukraine at any cost. This narrative was often described as indirectly pro-Russian in reality because it legitimized the Russian aggression. SNS was no exception in this regard and amplified the peace narrative in its campaign. Peace was presented as the only humane way out of the conflict, which makes it morally superior, too. SNS disagreed with the Slovak government in terms of supporting Ukraine's right to self-defence by supplying weapons to the state because it would only prolong the war and lead to more casualties. Moreover, SNS accused the arms industry of making a profit by selling arms to all involved parties and hence being interested in prolonging the war. Unsurprisingly, SNS linked this arms industry to the USA to add to its negative depiction.

Based on the posts published during the campaign, SNS was not interested in deepening relations with Ukraine. Moreover, it expressed clearly that it would not support Ukraine's membership in the EU or NATO. First, the party claimed to represent the will of Slovak citizens when it refused to send any other than

humanitarian aid to Ukraine. To feed the lukewarm stance towards Ukraine among citizens, SNS framed, for example, the dispute over the Ukrainian grain export as Ukraine being ungrateful for all the help it has received. The (unintentional) side effect of such proclamations may be a declining willingness to support Ukraine among the people. Also, it could make them more open to the peace scenario. Second, SNS referred to national interests when rejecting the Slovak involvement in Ukraine. The party emphasized that Slovakia needed to concentrate on the social well-being of its own citizens first. Ultimately, the polarization along the 'us vs. them' line strongly influenced how SNS framed the relations with Ukraine for its voters.

Noteworthy is the shift in foreign policy that SNS recommended concerning its southern neighbour, Hungary. Traditionally, SNS had been known for its harsh anti-Hungarian policy, although Slota's comments did not embitter the relations between the countries in recent years. Therefore, when Orbán referred to Slovakia as a separated part of Hungary during the campaign period, it had the potential to grow into a diplomatic skirmish. Surprisingly, the allegedly oldest Slovak party did not react as toughly as might be expected. Instead, SNS asked Hungary not to open old conflicts and to focus on cooperation. Orbán's regime is a clear role model for the Slovak nationalists; for example, they were inspired by Hungary banning the import of several Ukrainian commodities.

The rationale behind this mild reaction lies in the fact that according to SNS, Slovakia needed Hungary as an ally in the EU. As mentioned, SNS believed that the imaginary Cold War boundaries had not disappeared, and that today's EU member states are divided into eastern and western parts. The party's statements gave the impression that the Western states were looking down on the post-communist states. To counterbalance its influence in the EU, SNS put trust in the Visegrad Four. The party spoke more explicitly about Poland and Hungary than the Czech Republic, as SNS probably considered their governments more in agreement with its worldview. The V4 should be used to coordinate various policies on the regional level, for example policy on immigration or Ukraine, and to exercise more power within the EU.

Figure 5:
SNS' framing of its preferred foreign policy

Criticism of (former government's) foreign policy		
Theme	**Framing**	**Data transcript**
Orientation of foreign policy	- nationalism - sovereign - all four cardinal points	- *It's time to clip European civil servant's wings. This is what Slovak election is about, too; if we 'll have a government that won't be servile at all cost and will know how to say "no".*
West and Western structures	- regional structures as counterbalance - reformation of EU and NATO	- *...the eastern states must hold together to resist their [Germans and the French] willfullness. The western states overdo their behaviour toward us and they're wrong if they think we'll replace their colonies in Africa.* - *We're against the current format of NATO, even some French politicians are saying this. European states should have their own collective security. We cannot be put in danger by the American adventures.*
Relations with Russia	- no involvement in Ukraine - renewal of relations	- *We believe that we'll be able to contribute to improving relations with Russia after 1.10. We want good relations with all superpowers.* - *If we're about to invite Ukraine to NATO, let's invite Iraq and Afghanistan, too, to brings this foolishness to end.* - *If Russians were so bad, they would not deliver nuclear fuel and we would be done. Let's focus on Slovakia and not on Ukraine.*

Source: The authors.

8. Discussion: Smer-SD and SNS as the epitome of populist foreign policy?

After analysing the data, we identified that Smer's and SNS' approaches to framing foreign policy were similar to that described in the literature on populism in foreign policy. In the following paragraphs, we will summarize the main similarities while also highlighting the differences between the two parties. We realize that it may be challenging to define resemblances across various countries due to the specificity of the manifestations of populism in relation to the society and culture in which it is embedded (Urbinati, 2019). Nevertheless, we would like to highlight whether and how Smer-SD's and SNS' foreign policy stances parallel those found abroad.

Even in foreign policy, populists should refer to 'the people' to back up their legitimacy. Both Smer-SD and SNS fulfilled this criterion, as they claimed to reckon the interests of ordinary people (or they may speak of Slovak citizens) when formulating their foreign policies. Compared with Smer-SD, SNS pointed out 'the

nation' more often as the embodiment of 'the people'. The mixing of nationalist and populist narratives is a phenomenon we elaborated briefly above. It might come as no surprise since populism often carries some national aspect within it (Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). Additionally, SNS was an established actor on the Slovak nationalist scene and as we explained, Smer-SD had been falling for right-wing tendencies in recent years, too. In the Central European context, we may observe among some mainstream parties a continuous shift towards the right side of the spectrum. This trend is partially a result of the countries' communist history and the deeply rooted negative reputation of leftist ideology (Styczyńska, 2024). Consequently, such parties compete with the far-right for the votes of similar groups and may even harden their rhetoric to reach marginal groupings. In our case, this would explain why Smer and SNS often framed foreign policy issues similarly.

Second, in accordance with another essential feature of populism, Smer-SD and SNS defined the 'us' by clearly listing not only intrastate enemies, but also antagonists situated outside the state boundaries. Primarily, both parties distinguished themselves from the oppositional elites. Interestingly, when defining the enemies, both parties eliminated the national boundaries when they directly linked domestic elites with foreign adversaries. Consistently, such framing has been observed among other populists, too. Needless to say, the polarization bore a moral connotation (Mudde, 2004) and highlighted the difference in interests (Katsambekis, 2022), as the 'others' (the national elites, the West) were equalled with immorality, corruption and alienation from Slovak national interests.

Another characteristic shared by populists is the proclaimed effort to multilateralize their state's foreign relations (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Populists tend to utilize a less compromise-prone rhetoric which might harm established relations in the long run (Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016). Smer-SD and SNS called in unison for a balanced foreign policy or diplomacy on all four cardinal points. The parties were speaking against the Euro-Atlantic structures in their election campaigns because defining oneself against an established foreign policy offers populists another chance to draw a clear boundary between them and the elites.

During the campaign, Smer-SD and SNS indicated their deviation from the Euro-Atlantic policy concerning military aid to Ukraine and sanctions imposed on Russia. Whereas Smer aimed more of its critique at NATO, harnessing the anti-American sentiment present among Slovaks, SNS openly confronted rather the EU. During its years on the political scene, Smer has displayed what Mravcová and Havlík (2021) label a 'flexible approach'. This means that Smer does not have an anchored attitude towards the EU but instead adjusts it pragmatically based on voters' demands. Interesting is how SNS resurrected sentiments against West European states. Such a strategy built on 'othering' the Western member states or even including a post-colonialist narrative, which has been observed in other post-communist states like Hungary and Poland as well (Varga & Buzogany, 2020).

On the other hand, the parties' rejection of American primacy is shared by other foreign parties, by Rassemblement national in France and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany (Ostermann & Stahl, 2022), and in Hungary under Orbán's rule (Lehoczki, 2023). Among neighbouring countries, an exception was the former Polish government led by populist the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party, which worked on deepening bilateral relations with the USA but for whom relations with the EU were stigmatised by populism (Cadier, 2021).

The wish for a more fragmented and multipolar world among populists means that they do not perceive uniformly who or what is a security threat. Henke and Maher (2021) demonstrate this finding on the example of opinion on Russia among six European populist parties. Among them, some perceive Russia as a strategic partner whereas others share the EU's interests and perceive Russia as a threat. The 2022 Russian aggression in Ukraine revealed the differences among the otherwise close populist narratives, as a study on Poland and Hungary reveals (Kopper, Szalai, & Góra, 2023). The question is, which side will Slovakia take under the populist leadership?

Based on the campaign rhetoric, both Smer-SD and SNS slid towards Orbán's Hungary: they presented themselves as doves promoting a peaceful resolution in Ukraine. Like the AfD, Smer-SD and SNS framed their reconciliatory policy towards Russia 'as an expression of a more inward-looking, sovereignty-oriented foreign policy' (Wojczewski, 2022). Destradi and Plagemann (2019) note that populism does not have to lead automatically to a hostile foreign policy towards other states or institutions. However, a side effect of having populists in government might actually be warmer relations with other populist governments (Destradi et al., 2023).

What was initially perceived as an anomaly in the pre-election rhetoric – namely, the embrace of Hungarian leadership by both Smer-SD and SNS – could, in reality, signify a deepening of relations with a fellow regime. When Orbán was the only EU state leader to veto a funding package for Ukraine, Fico openly supported him: 'As long as I am the head of the Slovak government, I will never agree that a country should be punished for fighting for its sovereignty' (Chiappa, 2024). At the same time, strengthening regional alliances might be a step towards multipolarity. From Smer-SD's and SNS' perspective, this explains their anti-USA rhetoric as a rebellious manoeuvre against a unipolar world.

Building such an alliance is a reasonable step if perceived as a safety net against attacks on sovereignty. At the end of the day, 'sovereignty' is the buzzword around which Smer-SD's and SNS' populist framing revolves. According to Chryssogelos (2017), the sense of national sovereignty is rooted in populist foreign policy preferences, which aim to protect their 'people' from foreign powers and promise a revision of the established foreign policy. Discussions about a 'sovereign foreign policy' are shared by several populist actors across Central Europe. The roots of this approach are to be traced back to the period of the immigration

crisis and Orbán's policy style. Subsequently, he served as an inspiration to the Polish PiS, the German AfD, the Slovak Smer-SD, the Austrian FPÖ, and the Czech ANO (Jenne & Yavuz, 2024).

Smer's and SNS' framing of foreign policy flowed between populist and ethno-populist styles as categorized by Jenne (2021). Both parties, at least rhetorically, called for a systemic revision of Slovakia's foreign policy, which they claimed no longer represented 'the people's' interests. Additionally, by highlighting violations of sovereignty by international elites in collaboration with domestic ones, the parties created the impression that 'the people' were losing ethno-cultural power in their own state. Smer-SD's and SNS' right-wing tendencies were clearly reflected in their mobilization along the in/out axis against those who were depicted as threatening the essence of the Slovak nation. SNS, in particular, emphasized alleged threats to the nation's cultural identity, phenomena undermining Slovakia's sovereignty and imposing 'antagonist' ideologies, such as liberalism.

9. Conclusion: Quo Vadis Slovakia?

The result of the post-election negotiation was a coalition of Smer-SD, Hlas-SD and SNS. The record from previous Smer-SD governments suggests that the new government's foreign policy will be pragmatically adapted to maintain the coalition's stability. However, it is questionable to what extent Hlas-SD will act against Smer regarding foreign policy as we witnessed in the past with Most-Híd. Especially because many Hlas-SD deputies began their political careers at Smer-SD, where their ties remain strong. SNS, the third and junior coalition partner, occupies a delicate position because of the diversity of its parliamentary club, and incoherent positions. Yet, Fico has proven in the past that Smer-SD does not a priori reject a pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation even though his party's rhetoric, especially that directed towards the domestic electorate, sounds different. The post-election rhetoric of Smer-SD might remind us of Smer-SD from 2006-2009. Thus, we may expect a return of double-tracked foreign policy rhetoric, which will not undermine the Euro-Atlantic anchoring of the Slovak Republic.

On the other hand, there have already been changes made in Slovak diplomacy since the populist parties took over. A major novelty is that the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs is not held by a professional diplomat (currently, Juraj Blanár holds the office). Fico defended this nomination by the need to restore dynamics in the diplomatic department: 'We need a pike, which may even in an unconventional way chase away the old carps in the pond of Slovak diplomacy' (TA3, 2023). Some of Blanár's statements reveal his inclination towards the so-called alternative current and influence by Russian rhetoric: '…in Ukraine, there was a coup in 2014, where the legitimately elected Ukrainian president was

overthrown, [and] Russian-speaking citizens were supposed to use the Ukrainian language day in and day out'.

However, checks-and-balances were installed to stabilize the course of Slovak foreign policy: a long-time career diplomat, Marek Eštok, was appointed State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. From the external perspective, pro-Western politicians may 'correct' inconsistencies. Róbert Kaliňák, who is regarded in Smer-SD as a pro-American and pro-business politician, will be interested in maintaining relations with the USA due to modernization projects started in the Slovak Armed Forces. A similar constellation of leaders worked between 2006 and 2009, when nominees from the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs toned down Fico's radical statements to save the country's pro-Western orientation. In the end, the sharp rhetoric from the government will probably not lead to fundamental shifts in foreign policy; national interests will not be promoted at the risk of undermining the consensus in the EU and NATO.

We may expect several developments. First, the initial contacts between Fico and Orbán indicate interest in reviving the V4 platform. However, the current government in Prague will most likely seek to deepen the Czech-Polish tandem since the pro-European government took power in Poland. It is questionable to what extent Slovakia will cooperate with them or if it will lean more towards Hungary. Second, according to Smer-SD's programme, there might be efforts to deepen cooperation not only with Russia, but also with China, Vietnam, or other distant countries. Also, one of the priorities of Slovak diplomacy has been cooperation with the Balkans. Serbia's foreign policy setting corresponds with the vision of a balanced foreign policy, not to mention the historical roots of Slovak-Serbian relations. Last, in spite of the campaign rhetoric, the government shows no tendency to prevent private companies from supplying arms to Ukraine or to stop supplying non-lethal systems itself (Trend, 2023).

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