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Return of Illiberalism: The Results of the 2023 General Election in Slovakia[1]

Vlastimil Havlík, Jakub Lysek, Peter Spáč, Ľubomír Zvada[2]

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.

2   Department of Political Science, Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia; ORCID: 0000-0003-3650-5783. Department of Politics and European Studies, Palacký University Olomouc, Olomouc, Czechia; ORCID: 0000-0003-3583-9917. Department of Political Science, Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia; ORCID: 0000-0003-4395-689X. Department of Politics and European Studies, Palacký University Olomouc, Olomouc, Czechia; ORCID: 0000-0003-0869-5014.

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
OĽaNO	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), SDĽ (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-ĽSNS (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-ĽSNS, Sme rodina, Sieť, 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-ĽSNS around Milan Uhrík and Milan Mazurek founded the Republika party, and former Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Defence Minister Jaroslav Naď

left OĽaNO 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

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

Legend
Turnout in %

	11,12 - 60,57
	60,58 - 68,08
	68,09 - 72,64
	72,65 - 76,59
	76,60 - 97,22
	Military areas
—	districs boundaries
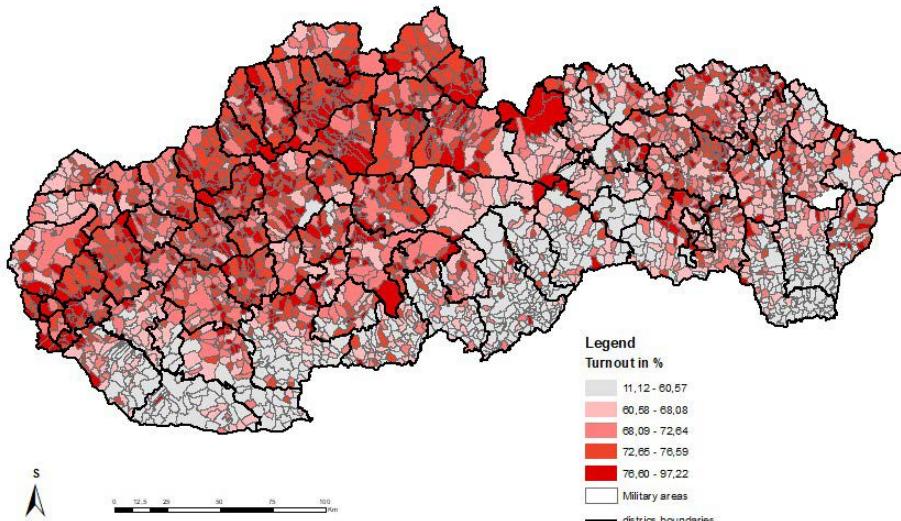
Note: Gradient colours are classified by quantiles. Each interval contains an equal number of observations.
Source: the Slovak Statistical Office.
Source: The authors.

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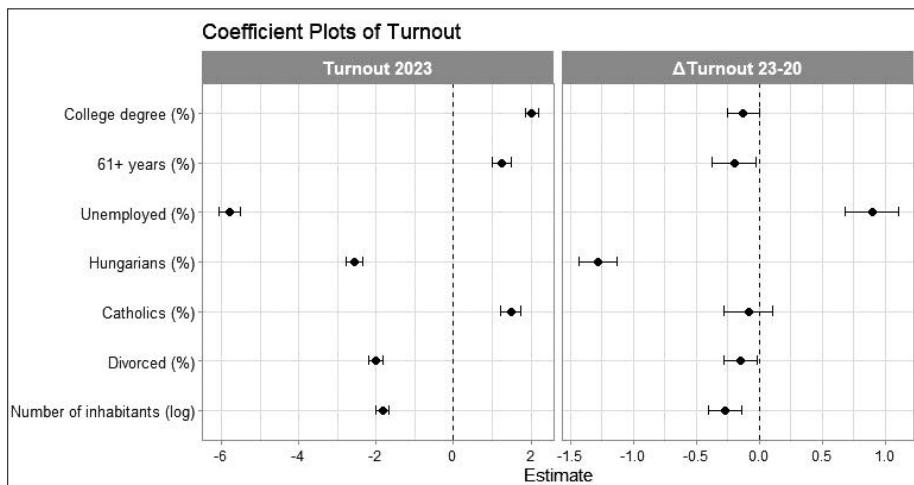
Note: Number of cases 2,969. Models statistics: Turnout (Adj. R^2 = 0.731), ΔTurnout 23-20 (Adj. R^2 = 0.164). Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via ggplot and broom packages in R. Weighed by the population. Data source: Slovak Statistical Office.
Source: The authors.

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, Stropokov, 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.

Turnout change between the 2020 and 2023 elections

Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023
Turnout change in %
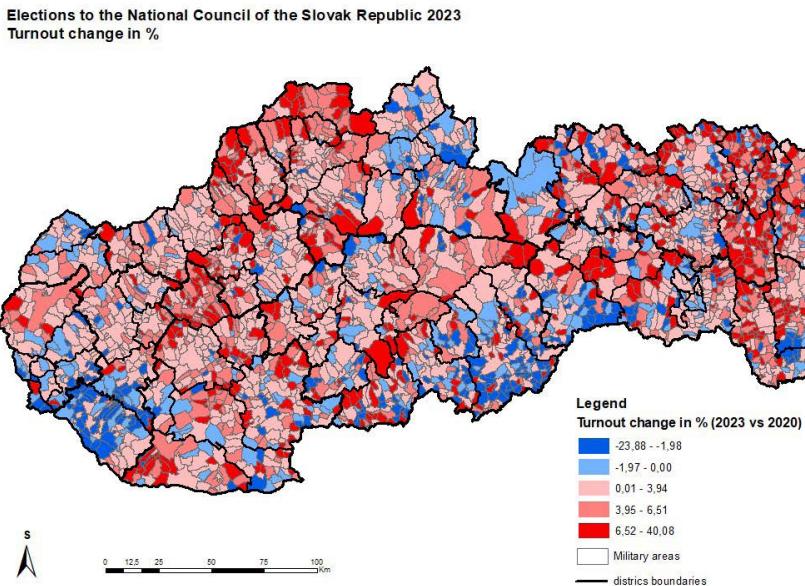
Note: Gradient colours are classified by quantiles but the upper bound of a second interval is set to 0 such that the blue colour shows a decrease and the red colour an increase in turnout in percentage points. Each interval contains a roughly equal number of observations. Source: Slovak Statistical 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 & Majo, 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-ĽSNS, 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
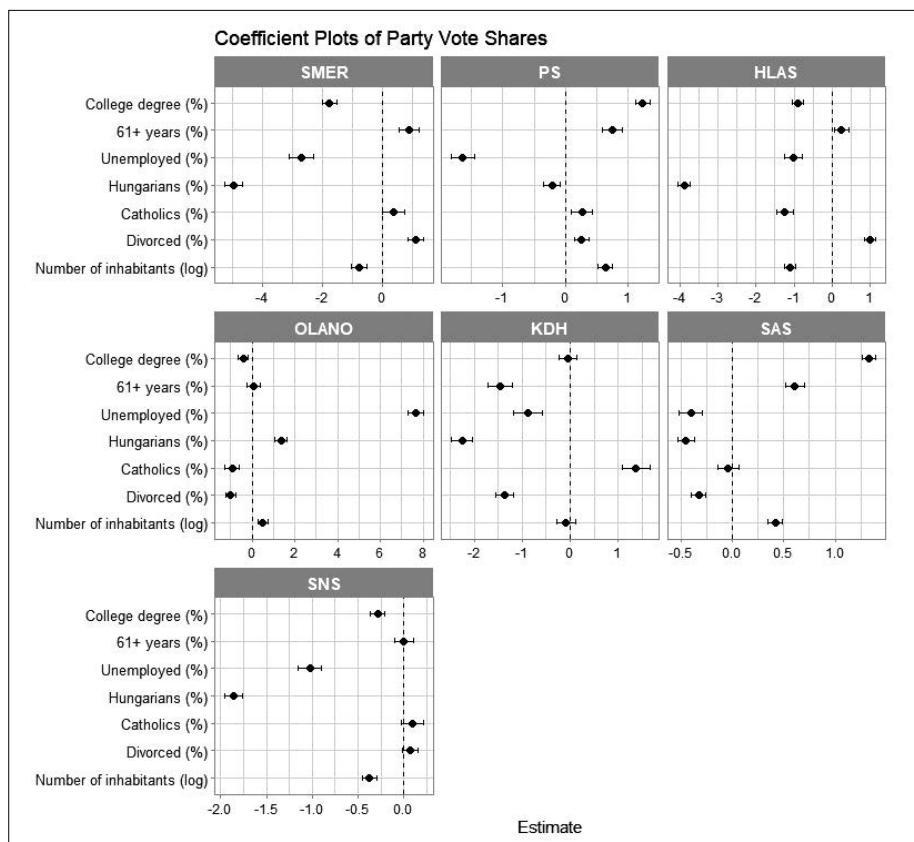
Note: Number of cases 2969. Models statistics: Smer (Adj. R^2 = 0.398), PS (Adj. R^2 = 0.682), Hlas (Adj. R^2 = 0.516), OĽaNO (Adj. R^2 = 0.569), KDH (Adj. R^2 = 0.338), SaS (Adj. R^2 = 0.775), SNS (Adj. R^2 = 0.462). Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via ggplot and broom packages in 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 SDĽ, 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 (Buštíková & Zvada, 2023).

Fourth in line, OĽaNO 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, OĽaNO's reputation in the eyes of the voters dropped dramatically. OĽaNO 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 OĽaNO are those with high unemployment rates. However, OĽaNO 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 OĽaNO movement co-opted representatives of ethnic minorities – Hungarians and Roma – represented by Magyar Szívek, andPačivale Roma[3] 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 OĽaNO 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

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

between the first and second rounds of elections shows that up to three-quarters of those who voted for OĽaNO 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.

Regression models explaining the dynamic change in vote share across 2023 and 2020 elections
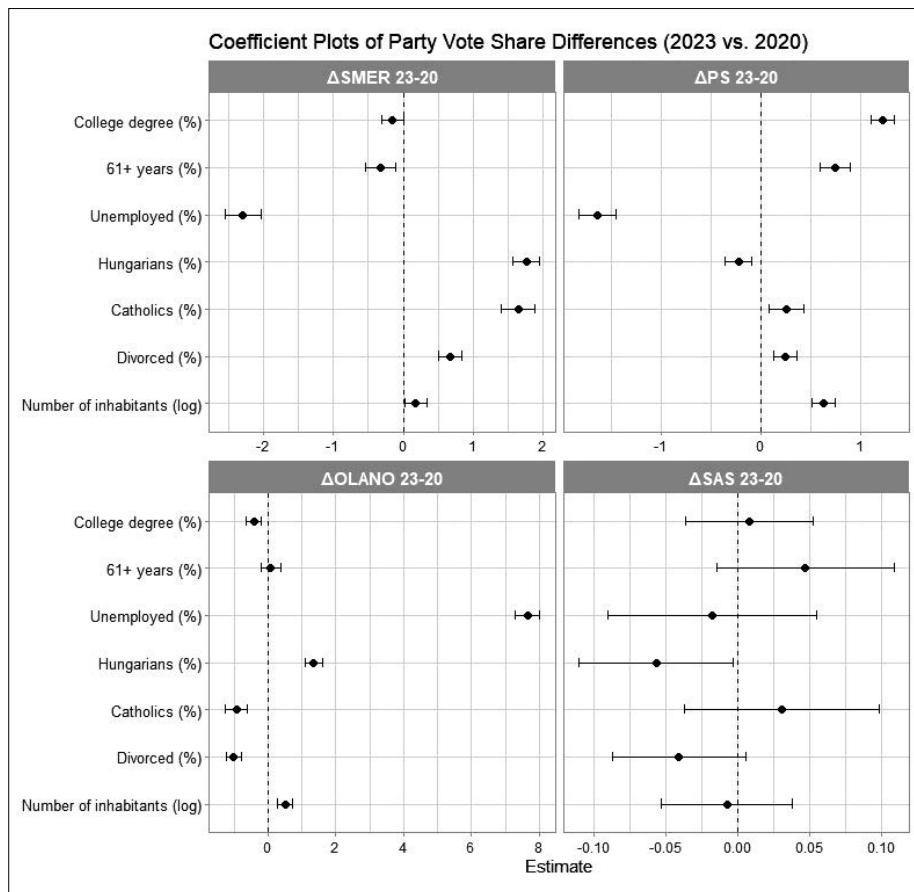
Note: Number of cases 2969. Models statistics: ΔSmer 23-20 (Adj. R^2 = 0.254), ΔPS 23-20 (Adj. R^2 = 0.682), ΔOĽaNO 23-20 (Adj. R^2 = 0.569), ΔSaS 23-20 (Adj. R^2 = 0.004). Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via ggplot and broom packages in R. Weighed by the population. The dependent 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
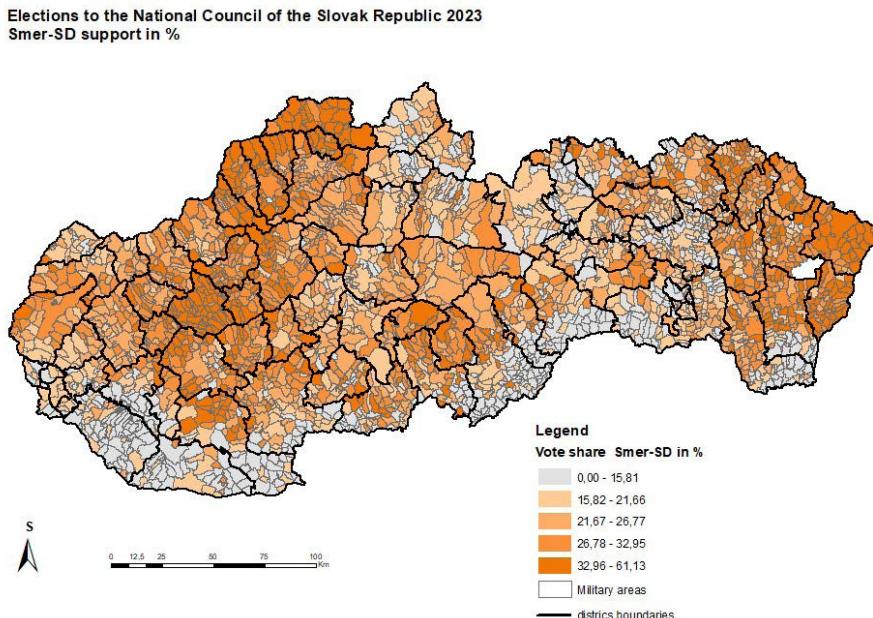
Source: The authors.

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 %
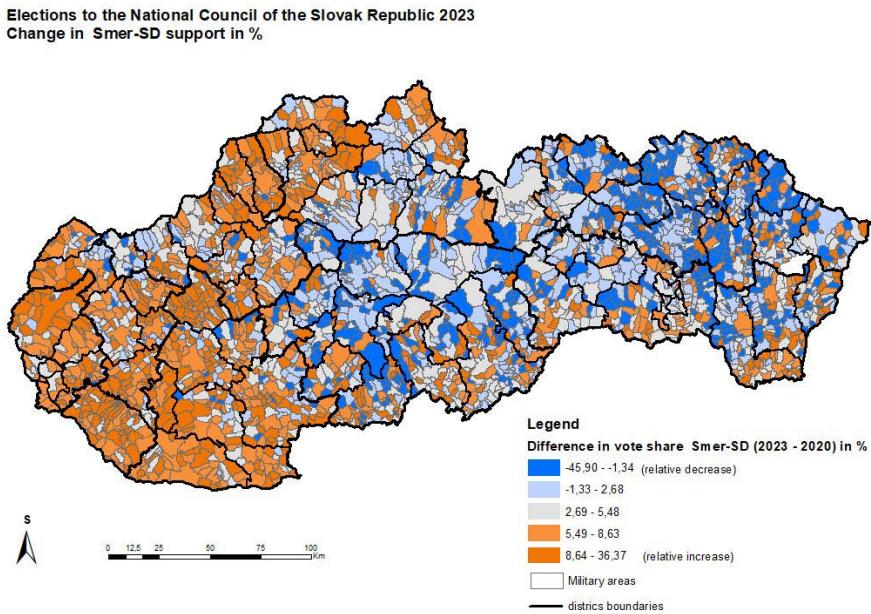
Source: The authors.

Map 5:
Party vote share for PS in 2023 elections

Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023
PS support in %
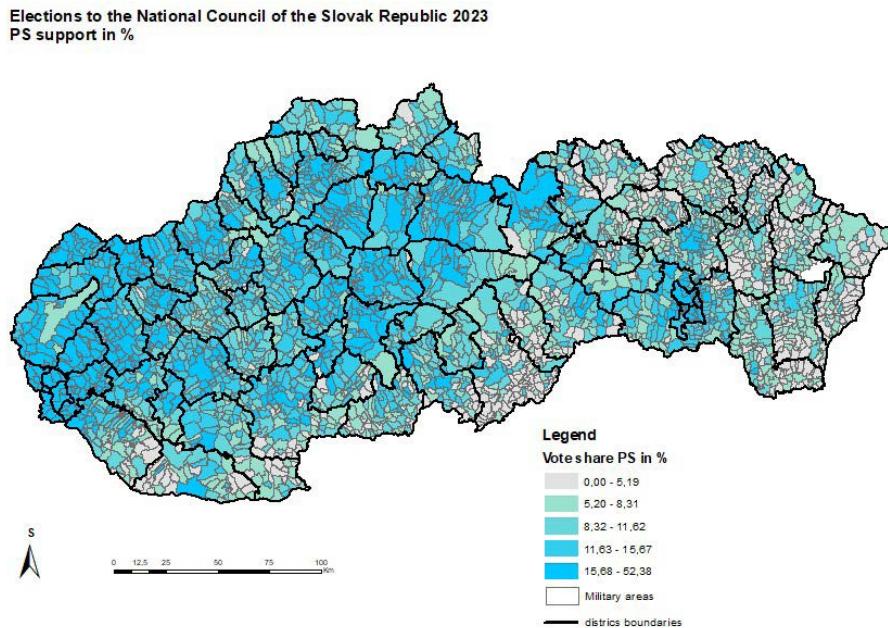
Source: The authors.

Party vote share change for PS between the 2020 and 2023 elections
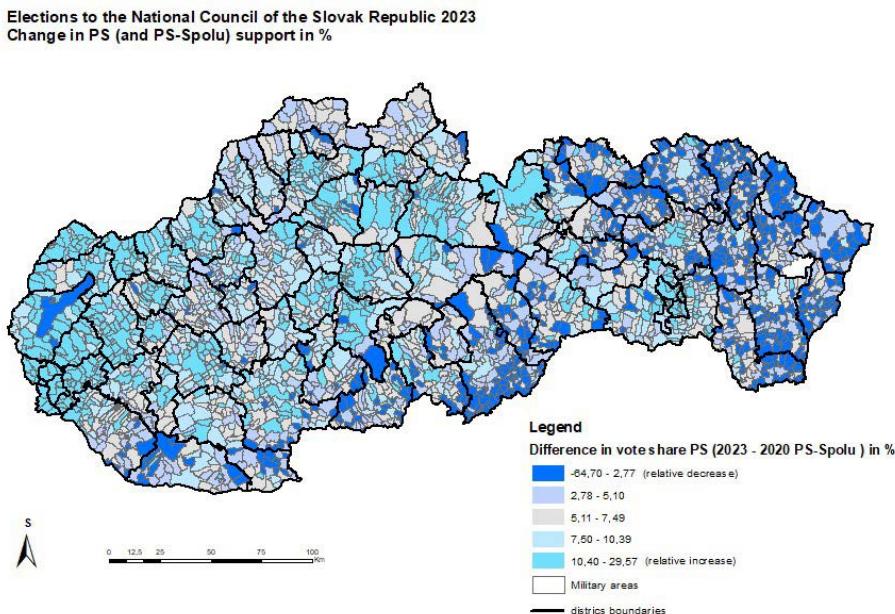
Note: In 2020, the PS ran under Koalicia PS a Spolu.
Source: The authors.

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 OĽaNO 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
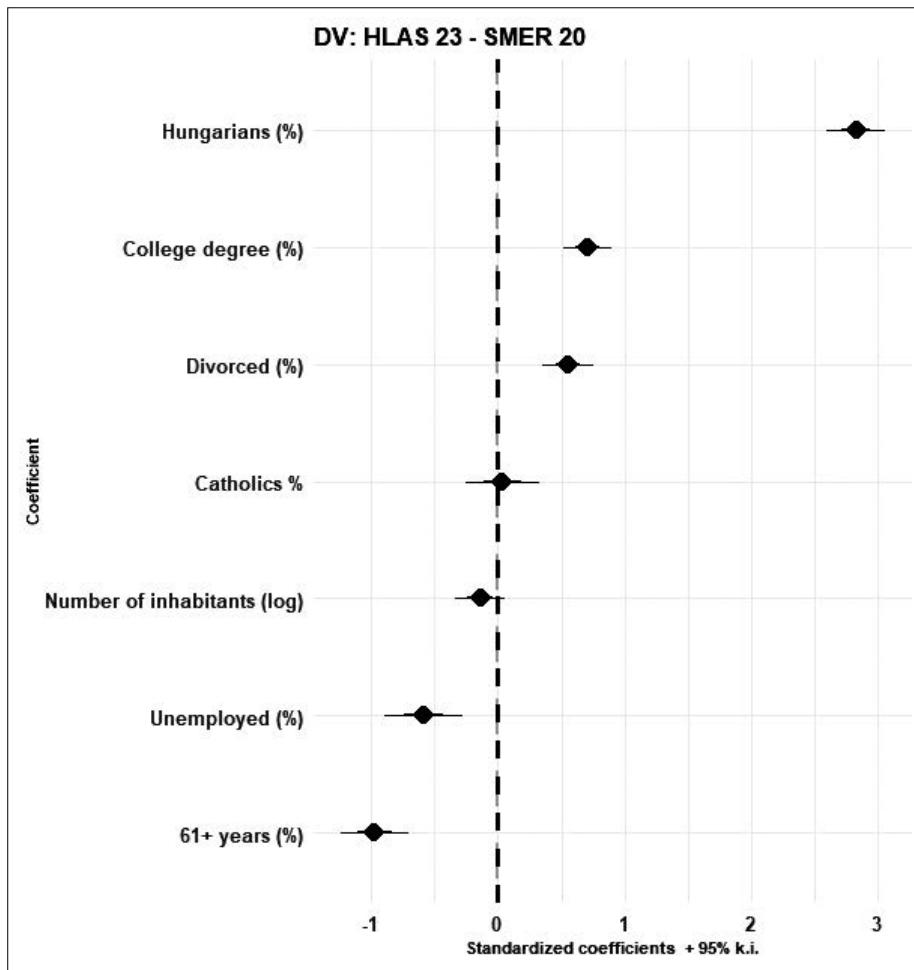
Note: Number of cases 2969. Models statistics Adj. R² = 0.226. Standardized coefficient with confidence intervals via coefplot package in R. Weighed by the population. The dependent variable is the change in the percentage vote share for Hlas in 2023 minus that for Smer in 2020. Data source: Slovak Statistical 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 OĽaNO.

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	**20.9**	15.7	0.9
PS	83.2	4.0	11.7	1.2
Hlas	47.1	**33.4**	19.3	0.3
OĽaNO	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
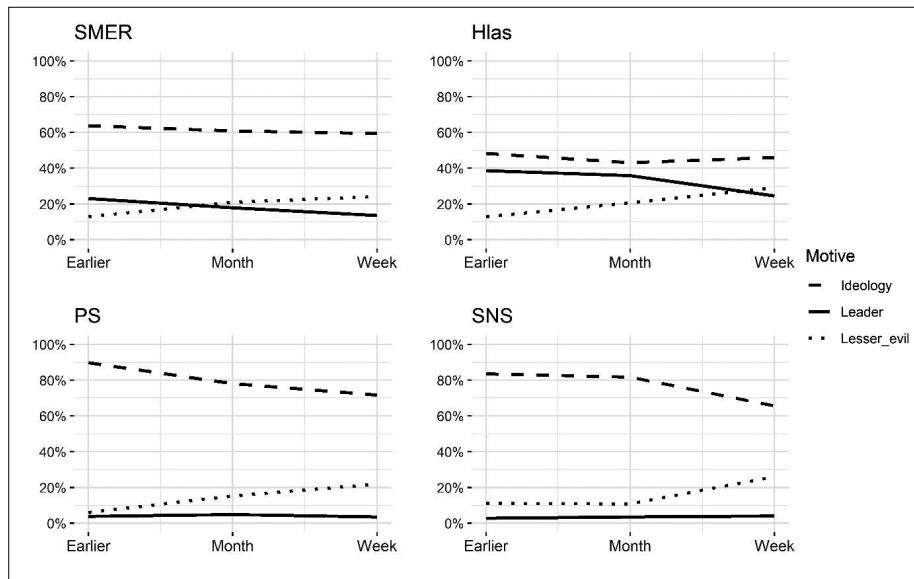
Note: the motive of saving the party from falling under threshold is not displayed due to its very low incidence.
Source: The authors.

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-ĽSNS 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 show 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.

Oľga 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 Cirhan 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, Cirhan 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 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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The Art of Self-selection or Voter intervention? The 2023 Election and the Shifting Social Bias of Slovak Parliamentary Elites since 2006

Elisabeth Bakke[1]

Abstract

Recent research has shown a trend towards more participatory nomination procedures in new as well as more established parties. However, in Slovakia most politically relevant parties have equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive candidate selection modes. In the first part of the article I draw on the elite literature to investigate cross-party variation in the social bias of parliamentary elites since 2006. Using the 2023 election as a point of departure, I go on to assess how representative MPs are of their own voters, and why social bias varies across parties despite their similar selection modes. The analysis demonstrates that the impact of the selection mode as well as of voter preferences is contingent on the nomination practices of the individual parties. I found strong elements of self-selection in nearly all parties: the members of the presidium nominated themselves, and the composition of the parliamentary elites thus to a considerable extent reflects who the presidium members are. The influence of the voters is limited, because they tend to confirm the priorities of the selectorates; however, in the case of the four smallest parties in 2023, preference voting to some extent mitigated the effect of self-selection. The main drivers of preference voting were the idiosyncratic nomination practice of Ordinary People, and the presence of organised groups and parties on the list (informal alliances).

1 Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1097 Blindern, NO-0317 Oslo, Norway, e-mail: elisabeth.bakke@stv.uio.no. ORCID: 0000-0001-5538-576X.

1. Introduction

In 2023, Progressive Slovakia became the first Slovak party ever to employ the zipper system for its parliamentary candidate list, and the first party to have a perfectly gender balanced caucus. It also had the youngest members of parliament (MPs). By contrast, the election winner Direction – Social Democrats (Smer-SD) had the oldest MPs and the lowest share of female MPs. The 2023 election was one for the record books also in other respects. A total of 85 seats changed hands, more than in any other election since the transition to democracy. The newcomers Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Voice – Social Democrats (Hlas-SD) accounted for 59 of these, but the comeback of two perennials in Slovak politics – the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) – also contributed to the high seat turnover. Moreover, a record-high number of MPs were elected due to preference votes. However, none of the MPs of the three largest parties – Smer, Hlas, and PS – owed their election to preference votes; voter preferences only had an impact on the caucuses of the four smallest parties and alliances: KDH, SNS, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), and the alliance headed by Igor Matovič and his Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO).

To be sure, middle-aged, well-educated men in high-status professions are still overrepresented among MPs in Slovakia as well as elsewhere in Europe (Bakke, 2020; Best & Cotta, 2000; Semenova, Edinger, & Best, 2014). However, as illustrated above, there are some interesting differences between parties.

In the first part of this article I draw on the elite literature to investigate how the social bias of parliamentary elites in Slovakia has varied over time between new and more established parties, and between ideological clusters of parties. The analysis of new parties is limited to electorally successful newcomers *in their first election*, while parties that made comeback are treated as old parties.[2] I apply a definition of newness that includes 'genuinely new parties' (Sikk, 2005, p. 399) as well as new parties founded by leading figures of established parties.

In the second part of the article I focus on the most recent parliamentary election and investigate how representative the MPs elected in 2023 are of their own voters; why the social bias varies between the three most successful parties despite their arguably quite similar modes of candidate selection; and how and why preference votes disrupted the original ranking of only the four smallest parties and alliances. The analysis is based on a unique dataset covering all individuals who have served in the National Council of the Slovak Republic since the end of communism, as well as on structured party interviews. To assess how

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2   The party register lists 272 parties since 1990, of which 59 are currently active, at least on paper, while 106 are under liquidation. The rest have been dissolved or are Czechoslovak parties that no longer operate in Slovakia. See party register website at https://ives.minv.sk/PolitickeStrany/.

representative the current parties are of their voters, I also use data from the exit poll conducted by the FOCUS agency for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.[3]

My point of departure is Norris and Lovenduski's (1993) conceptualisation of elite recruitment as a funnel, in which the pool of aspirants is filtered through the nomination processes of the parties and the voters have the final say. It is generally assumed that social bias increases from the top to the bottom of the funnel; however, the inclusiveness of the selectorate and the centralisation of the nomination process is believed to matter (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). More specifically, list balancing – and thus descriptive representation – should be easier to achieve in proportional representation (PR) systems when the parties' nomination processes are centralised and the selectorates narrow (Rahat & Cross, 2018). In Slovakia, most politically relevant parties have equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive candidate selection modes, which should theoretically make list balancing easier. However, this also means that selection mode as such is not a plausible explanation of *cross-party variation*. Such variation may instead occur because parties attract different types of contenders (supply of aspirants); because the gatekeepers' selection criteria or the relative importance of these criteria differ across parties; or because the voters of individual parties prefer different types of candidates (demand).

The article contributes to the research literature in two ways. First, it extends the focus from cross-national and longitudinal variation in the social bias of parliamentary elites to include cross-party variation. Second, it demonstrates that the impact of the selection mode as well as of voter preferences on parliamentary elites is contingent on the nomination practices of individual parties. In Slovakia, equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive candidate selection modes produce diverging outcomes across parties; and moreover, these differences in social bias to a large extent reflect who the selectorates are.

I start with an overview of the research literature. In the next section I introduce the parties and institutional framework for candidate selection in Slovakia. The analysis starts with an overview of cross-party variation in social bias over time, before I zoom in on the 2023 elite.

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2. State of the art: the elite literature

This article is about descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967) – how and why the social bias of parliamentary elites varies between parties. While important, whether and how this matters for party cohesion, for policy output, or for the quality of democracy is outside the scope of the article (Rahat & Cross, 2018).

The social bias of parliamentary elites is well documented. Across Europe, members of parliament (MPs) are predominantly male, older than the average citizen, better educated, and drawn from higher status occupations. Women, ethnic and religious minorities, rural populations, peasants, and workers have traditionally been underrepresented, while the share of MPs with politics as a profession has increased since 1945. The level of professionalisation was naturally initially lower in the post-communist region than in Western Europe, but male dominance was even stronger, and MPs were found to be even better educated than their West European counterparts (Best & Cotta, 2000, pp. 497–504; Cotta & Best, 2007; Semenova et al., 2014, p. 298). Slovakia is no exception (Bakke, 2020).

In modern democracies, candidate selection is – in practice, if not always in principle – the prerogative of political parties. The Constitution and/or electoral law regulate who is eligible to vote and stand for election, how votes are translated into seats, and the degree of personalisation – the extent to which voters can influence 'which individual candidates […] are to be elected' (Jaklič & Setnikar, 2022, p. 199). Some countries, such as Germany, also have detailed legal regulations for candidate selection (Reiser, 2022, p. 4). In most cases, however, it is up to the individual parties to decide their own candidate selection procedures: party by-laws and/or internal guidelines typically determine who adopts the candidate list, while formalisation and institutionalisation of nomination practices vary across parties. Older, more established parties tend to have more institutionalised practices than newer parties (Reiser, 2014). Moreover, in the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia I found the nomination processes of new parties to be quite informal in their first election (Bakke, 2020; 2022).

Following Hazan & Rahat (2010), scholars distinguish between two main dimensions of candidate selection: the inclusiveness of the selectorate and the centralisation of the process. The former dimension is about the size of the selectorate, while the latter is about where candidate selection takes place – at national or constituency level. The trend is towards more participatory procedures in new as well as established parties (Cordero & Coller, 2018, p. 4). Party primaries are often regarded as more inclusive, and thus more 'democratic', than the convention model, but this is true only if parties have more than a handful of members. Moreover, this trend does not apply to all new parties. Coller et al. (2018, pp. 263–265) found that some entrepreneurial new parties had more centralized, leadership-dominated, and exclusive selection modes. In Slovakia this applies to most parties (see below).

Norris and Lovenduski (1993) conceptualise candidate selection as a funnel, in which the pool of aspirants is filtered through the nomination process of the parties and the voters have the final say. The aspirants are those who fulfil the legal criteria (typically citizenship and age) as well as the party-specific criteria (such as party membership), and have sufficient political interest, ambition, time, and/or money to pursue a political career (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993, p. 381). Since neither party membership nor willingness to run for election is equally distributed, the pool of aspirants is a limited, unrepresentative subset of the voters. In Denmark, only 11% of party members would run for election to the parliament if encouraged by their party, while another 13% 'would consider' it. Moreover, with the exception of age, those who were willing to run were even less representative of the voters than rank-and-file members (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019, pp. 162–163). Based on data from advanced democracies, Heidar & Wauters conclude that women, young people, the less educated, and people in low-status occupations were consistently underrepresented among party members, whether compared to the electorate at large or the parties' own voters. Party members thus did not mirror the population, and probably never have (Heidar & Wauters, 2019, pp. 8, 171).

The selectorate (aka 'gatekeepers') select candidates from among the eligible and willing, and put together a ranked list. Besides personal qualifications, traditionally important selection criteria (especially for top positions) are party loyalty, political experience, incumbency, and wealth. To counter social bias, selectorates sometimes employ additional list-balancing criteria such as gender, age, minority status, and geography (Valdini, 2012, p. 741; Reiser 2022, p. 2). It has been argued that while inclusive and decentralised selectorates (such as party primaries at the constituency level) are less capable of coordinating and controlling the overall results of the process, list balancing is easier when the selectorate is narrow and the process centralised (Rahat & Cross, 2018; but see Pruysers, Cross, Gauja, & Rahat, 2017). However, candidate selection involves trade-offs – between party loyalty and electability, and between descriptive representation and skills needed to win elections or serve as an MP, such as communication skills and expertise. Based on German data, Reiser found that the priorities of the party selectorate depended on whether the constituency was 'safe' for the party: selectorates prioritised party loyalty in safe seats and electability in contested seats (Reiser, 2022, p. 2; Bakke, 2022, pp. 365, 369). Agency clearly matters: selection criteria vary across parties, and so does the will to promote underrepresented groups (Keith & Verge, 2018).

Finally, the influence of the voters depends on the personalisation of the electoral system. In closed-list PR systems, party selectorates have a monopoly on candidate selection. In open and flexible-list PR systems such as the Slovak one, the voters can influence the ranking – and thus who gets elected – by casting preference votes for their preferred candidate(s). This introduces an element of intra-party competition (André, Depauw, Shugart, & Chytilek, 2017; Crisp,

Olivella, Malecki, & Sher, 2013). In the Czech context, Balík and Hruška (2022) found that individual features such as female gender, university education, incumbency, and politics as a profession had a positive effect. Voters rely on primary information (e.g. incumbency and celebrity status) as well as secondary information reported on the ballot (e.g. gender, age, education, profession, place of residence, and party membership), but beyond this, they use the party's ranking as a cue. Top-ranked candidates therefore tend to get more preference votes than lower-ranked candidates, and candidates in the first and last positions get a bonus (see e.g. Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2015; Spáč, 2016). The ballot position effect reduces the impact of voter preferences on the composition of the parliamentary elites.

Cross-national and longitudinal variation in the social bias of parliamentary elites has so far received more attention than cross-party differences. In this article I look at cross-party differences from two perspectives. On the one hand, I look at differences between new and more established parties. New parties may attract people from a wider range of social backgrounds (supply), and they may be more open to socially more diverse candidates, and potentially also independent candidates (demand), both because traditionally important selection criteria such as incumbency and party loyalty are less relevant (Valdini, 2012, p. 741), and because new parties often have fewer members and/or limited financial resources and material incentives to offer (Bolleyer, 2011, pp. 8, 11). However, the need to raise public awareness and present themselves as competent will not be any less pressing. Criteria such as name recognition, communication skills, and expertise are therefore likely to be more important, which favours well-educated candidates from high-status professions.

On the other hand, I look at differences between ideologically similar clusters of parties. The gender gap in *voting behaviour* is well documented, with women voting more conservative until the late 1960s and more leftist since then (for an interesting recent contribution, see Koeppl-Turyna, 2020). The *membership* of leftist parties also tends to be more gender-balanced, and in Western Europe left-wing parties have been found to outperform right-wing parties in terms of female *representation*, although recent research shows variation within the left along the GAL-TAN axis (Keith & Verge, 2018). Beyond this, voters of green/left-libertarian parties tend to be younger and better educated, while far right voters are more likely to be male and less educated (Santos & Mercea, 2024). Likewise, members of new parties are on average younger, green parties have more female and more young members, and the members of (some) radical right parties are more representative in terms of income and education (Heidar & Wauters, 2019, pp. 8, 171–172; see also Dassonneville & McAllister, 2023, pp. 17–21). The EurElite project did suggest that the social profile of candidates and MPs vary by party family at least to some extent (Cotta & Best, 2007).

3. Electoral system, parties, and candidate selection in Slovakia

The electoral system for parliamentary elections is regulated by the current electoral law (§42–71), and since 2023 also by the Constitution (§74).[4] Slovakia's flexible-list proportional representation (PR) system combines the Hagenbach-Bischoff formula with one electoral constituency, a 5% threshold for parties, and a 7% threshold for electoral alliances of two or three parties. Under the current rules, voters may endorse individual candidates on the list of their choice by casting one to four preference votes, and if more than 3% of those voting for a list endorse a candidate, he or she moves up; otherwise, the ballot ranking stands. Since 2006, between 74% and 84% of the voters of parliamentary parties have cast preference votes, and these voters on average use three of the four votes at their disposal. Each party/alliance can nominate a maximum of 150 candidates, and only registered parties can run for election. To register a new party, 10,000 signatures are needed (Zákon 85/2005, §6). However, since the party law allows registered parties to change their name and statutory organs, an easier way out is to buy off the stakeholder of a 'sleeping' party.[5] (For more details on electoral system reform, see Charvát, 2023; Mesežnikov, 2014; and Lebovič, 1999).

 The party system has arguably been quite unstable, especially since the turn of the millennium. There is no party with an unbroken presence in parliament since 1990, new parties have won representation in every election but one, and electoral volatility has been consistently high (Gyárfášová, Hlatky, & Slosiarik, 2024). The strong personalisation of Slovak politics is part of the reason for this: charismatic political leaders have played an important role in party formation, and party brands have been strongly associated with the founder. The most obvious examples are perhaps Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), and Robert Fico's Direction – Social Democrats (Smer-SD), but there are several more recent examples, such as Richard Sulík's Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), Igor Matovič's 'Slovakia' (formerly Ordinary People and Independent

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4 Constitutional protection applies to PR elections and Slovakia as one constituency. To change any of these elements a 3/5 supermajority is needed. See the Constitution (Ústava Slovenskej Republiky z 1. septembra 1992) and the electoral law (Zákon 180 z 29. mája 2014 o podmienkach výkonu volebného práva) for details. Both are available at Slov-Lex, https://www.slov-lex.sk/.

5 Two of the three newcomers in the 2016 election used this loophole in the election law. Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) was first registered as the Wine Lovers party in 2000. In 2009-2010, Martin Beluský and Rastislav Schlosár (who later were to become MPs) took over the party. In late 2015 Boris Kollár took over the rights to first one party, and, when the members protested, a second party – the party of Slovak citizens. Two more recent examples are the 2019 transfer of the rights to Independent Forum (registered in 1998) to Anna Záborská, who founded the Christian Union (KÚ), and the 2021 transfer of the rights to the party Voice of the People (registered as HZD in 2002) to Milan Uhrík, who founded the party Republika. Another less successful example is the transfer of the rights to the party ANO from Pavol Rusko to Nora Mojsejová in 2011.

Personalities, OĽaNO), Boris Kollar's We are Family (Sme Rodina), and Peter Pellegrini's Voice – Social Democrats (Hlas-SD).

Most first-generation parties in Slovakia were modelled on the mass party, organised bottom-up, and combined a hierarchical structure with substantial membership, and a network of branches roughly corresponding to the levels of state administration (Ondruchová, 2000; Rybář, 2011). Only two of the five parties that constituted the core of the party system in the 1990s are currently in parliament: the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). Both returned to parliament in 2023 after a spell 'out in the dark', but by then their memberships had declined to a fraction of their original size. The once dominant Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the ex-communist Democratic Left Party (SDĽ) are defunct, while the Hungarian Coalition (MK) merged with two other Hungarian parties into the extra-parliamentary Hungarian Alliance (Aliancia) in 2021.

Smer is the only surviving second-generation party. Having started out as a centrist populist party in 1999, it merged with electorally weaker social democratic parties (including Fico's former party SDĽ) in the run-up to the 2006 election, adopted a social democratic platform, and went on to occupy the centre-left. By contrast, Smer's main competitor on the left–right dimension in the early 2000s, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), collapsed in the wake of the Gorilla corruption and surveillance scandal in 2012. Neither party had many members in 2002 (a little over 5,000), but while the organisation of SDKÚ resembled the bottom-up structure of KDH, Smer was leadership-dominated and organised top-down from the beginning (Rybář, 2006, p. 167; Bakke & Sitter, 2020; Zvada, 2023).

Four third-generation parties won seats in the 2023 election, three of which belong to the volatile centre-right. The oldest of these is the market liberal SaS, founded by the circle around Richard Sulík in 2009. The four founding (and until 2019 only) members of Ordinary People[6] were elected from the bottom of the SaS list in 2010 and once they had registered as a separate 'movement' in late 2011, they applied the same rule to all incumbents seeking re-election. Ordinary People was the brainchild of Igor Matovič, and has never even pretended to be a party (Bakke, 2020, p. 358). In addition to providing a platform for independent candidates, Matovič has allowed candidates for small parties and groups to run on the OĽaNO ticket. The caucus has comprised quite conservative as well as more liberal MPs, but the main agenda has been to fight corruption. In 2020, OĽaNO unexpectedly won the election and formed a four-party coalition government with SaS, the

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6 Because of amendments to the electoral law in 2018 (in force since 2019) and the party law in 2020, it is in practice no longer possible to have fewer than 45 members. The party law (Zákon 85/2005, §6) requires parties to have an executive body of at least nine members, and the electoral law (Zákon 180/2014, §50) stipulates that in order to run, parties must attach signatures at least equalling five times the number of members in the executive body, i.e 45. These 45 must be registered party members.

conservative For the People (Za ľudí), and the populist We are Family. Despite a number of defections, the coalition struggled on until Sulík finally had enough and left in September 2022. By then OĽaNO was perilously close to the electoral threshold. It nevertheless entered into a formal alliance with two electorally marginal parties for the 2023 election: For the People and the ultra-conservative Christian Union (KÚ), which had run on the OĽaNO ballot also in 2020.

The most successful newcomer in 2023 was the social liberal Progressive Slovakia (PS). It was founded in 2017 and did well in two consecutive elections in 2019: First its former vice-chair Zuzana Čaputová won the presidential election, and then the alliance of PS and Together (Spolu), a liberal-conservative party, won the European Parliament election. The current PS chairman Michal Šimečka was one of his party's MEPs. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, however, the same alliance closely missed the 7% electoral threshold.

Finally, upon leaving the Smer caucus along with ten other MPs, former prime minister Peter Pellegrini founded the social democratic Hlas in 2020. By the time of its official registration in September that year Hlas had already surpassed Smer in the polls and remained the most popular party in Slovakia until early 2023. Compared to Smer, Hlas came across as more pro-European, less culture conservative, and considerably more moderate than Smer in its rhetoric, with Pellegrini repeatedly stressing the value of decency in politics.

An additional four parties have won seats on their own in at least one election since 2010. Béla Bugár founded Bridge (Most–Híd) in 2009, after leaving the Hungarian Coalition (MK). The party won representation in three consecutive elections, but fell below the threshold in 2020 and merged with MK in 2021. All the three newcomers in the 2016 election have failed. The centre-right Network party (Sieť#) failed in 2020 and is now defunct, while Boris Kollár's We are Family and Marián Kotleba's far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) failed in 2023. Republika, an offshoot of Kotleba's party founded by MEP Milan Uhrík in 2021, did not cross the electoral threshold in 2023 despite promising polls. (For more on party system development, see e.g. Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

Today, most of the politically relevant parties are organised top-down, and on average have lower membership and fewer branches than parties used to have in the 1990s. While HZDS peaked at 72,000 in 2000, all current parties in Slovakia – including the two surviving first-generation parties SNS and KDH – have fewer than 14,000 members and five of the parties that have won representation in the last two elections have fewer than 1,000 members (Table 1).

Table 1:
Party membership of selected parties as per 31.12.2023

Party	Smer-SD	Hungarian Alliance	KDH	We are Family*	Hlas-SD	SNS	Republika	Kotleba	PS	SaS	For the People	OĽaNO
Members	13,264	10,285	5,834	2,781	2,711	2,105	1,475	807	714	258	170	62

Source: Annual reports of the respective parties for 2023. *We are Family had only 466 paying members.

Apart from being subject to general eligibility requirements (Slovak citizenship and age above 21), candidate selection in Slovakia is not regulated by law, and parties are thus free to organise the nomination process as they please. Party by-laws of all major parties since 2006 specify which body formally adopts the candidate list, and in many cases also who drafts the proposal, while selection criteria and nomination practices are less formalised.[7]

Because the whole country is one constituency (since 1998), candidate selection is equally centralised in all parties, while the inclusiveness of the selectorates has been declining. Among the first-generation parties, the now defunct HZDS had on paper the most inclusive selectorate (a congress of 500–600 delegates, also representing local branches), but in practice party chairman Vladimír Mečiar had a lot of influence (V. Mečiar, interview, 28 May 2008). Likewise, fairly large nomination congresses adopted the lists of the ex-communist SDĽ. In KDH, MK, and, until 2005, SNS, medium-sized councils (80–90 persons) dominated by the regions adopted the lists, but the party leadership proposed the ranking. After the merger of SNS and the True Slovak National Party (PSNS) in 2005, new by-laws gave the then seven-member presidium the power to adopt candidate lists. Both SNS (albeit with a bigger presidium) and KDH have retained their level of inclusiveness. As for the second-generation parties, SDKÚ is to my knowledge the only party ever to use party primaries, while the lists of Smer were originally adopted by the wider party leadership, including the regional chairmen (Bakke, 2012; Bakke, 2020; see also Outlý et al., 2013, pp. 214–230).

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7 This section is based on party by-laws, and on the author's party interviews. Party by-laws are available on party webpages (for defunct parties, see Wayback Machine). While the by-laws of first-generation parties were silent about who was responsible for compiling the draft, second- and third-generation parties are much more likely to state this explicitly. The by-laws of Smer, Hlas, SaS, OĽaNO, For the People, We are Family, Most–Híd, and Republika explicitly place the responsibility for compiling the list in the hands of the party leader, while Aliancia by-laws give this responsibility to the gremium (6 persons). At the point of the interview, the party leader also had this role in PS (interview, 2023), and SNS (interview, 2017), while the presidium (13 persons) compiles the KDH list, but with the chairman in a leading role (interview, 2024).

With the exception of KDH, where the Council (approx. 120 members) adopts the list (and the Hungarian Alliance), all current politically relevant parties have narrow selectorates. The presidium (9–24 members) approves the list, and in most cases the party leader proposes the ranking, sometimes based on input from e.g. the regions. Among the parliamentary parties this applies to the party leaders of Smer, Hlas, For the People, SaS, and OĽaNO (the whole list), as well as Progressive Slovakia and SNS (only the first 30). In the case of SaS, the Republican Council (13 members) admittedly approves the list; however, this body is equivalent to the presidium of the other parties in size as well as function. Major extra-parliamentary parties are no different: the chairman proposes and the presidium approves candidate lists of We are Family, Republika, and probably Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia.[8] In short, candidate selection in Slovakia is not only centralised but also quite exclusive, and this applies to (nearly) all parties.

This means that the members of the presidium in practice decide the composition of the candidate list and ultimately the social bias of the parliamentary elite – unless the voters interfere. Selection and ranking criteria are therefore paramount. If we are to believe the research literature, one single list with 150 names should make list-balancing straightforward – if the presidium is so inclined. However, the trade-off between descriptive representation and other important criteria such as electability and expertise is more likely to pose a dilemma for new and electorally marginal parties than for larger and more established parties. Smaller parties are also more vulnerable to voter interference in the ranking of the list.

4. Who are the 2023 parliamentary elites, and how did they change?

This section first gives an overview of the changes in the composition of the parliamentary elites in Slovakia after the 2023 election, and second, assesses variations in social bias over time between new parties and more established parties as well as between party clusters.

While a record-high number of 85 seats changed hands, 30 seats more than in 2020, the number of re-elected incumbents remained almost the same and the number of MPs with previous experience as an MP was actually higher (Figure 1). The elites are thus in a sense more stable than the parties. A closer look reveals that 18 of the 60 re-elected incumbents were elected for a different party, as were

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8 Kotleba's party repeatedly refused to grant an interview, but considering the strong position of the chairman in that party, it is likely that he compiled the list, also because Republika does it this way. (Parties in Slovakia formed through splits tend to 'inherit' their mother party's organisational practices).

nearly half of the MPs who made comeback (eight of 17 MPs). This testifies to the fluidity of the Slovak party system. Smer stands out in that none of their MPs had run for a different party in the previous election. Conversely, the incumbents who won re-election for Hlas were (unsurprisingly) identical with the eleven who had left the Smer caucus in 2020. In its comeback, SNS had three incumbents re-elected, all representing Life – National Party (Život), a 2019 split from KDH, who had run on the ballot of Kotleba's party in 2020. Likewise, three of the nine incumbents re-elected for SaS had been elected on the ballot of For the People in 2020. The same applies to the single incumbent re-elected for Progressive Slovakia. Of the ten incumbents re-elected for the alliance of OĽaNO, For the People, and the Christian Union, six (including the NOVA chairman) were nominated by OĽaNO, two represented the Christian Union, while only chairwoman Veronika Remišová won re-election from For the People. All four party leaders ran from the bottom of the list.

Despite the high turnover, the overall changes in the social bias of the parliamentary elites were rather marginal. The gender balance improved slightly, from 21% to 22% female MPs (Figure 2), but Slovakia lagged even farther behind the European (31.5%) and global (27%) average (IPU Parline, 2024). Moreover, the parliamentary elite was even more socially biased than before in terms of age, education, and place of residence (Figures 3–5).[9] The already disproportionally large share of Bratislava residents increased by three percentage points to 43%; MPs elected in 2023 were on average one year older (at 49) than those elected in the previous election; a record-high number were university graduates (97%: up nine percentage points compared to 2020), and a substantial share (17%) even held a PhD degree.[10] Finally, the occupational backgrounds of the MPs are still distinctly (upper) middle-class, with managers, lawyers, and businessmen as the most numerous groups besides professional politicians (Figure 6). The most striking difference compared to the 2020 election is the lower share of professional politicians (mayors, governors, assistants of MPs, etc.) among the new MPs. Overall, engineers, technicians, economists, and scholars have lost ground compared to the 1990s, while managers, lawyers, businessmen, and professional politicians have gained. Together they have consistently comprised around half of the new (non-incumbent) MPs since 2006.

9 There was no new party in 2006. New parties are therefore marked with bars in Figures 2–5.

10 Lesser doctorates like JUDr., MUDr., and Ph.Dr. have been quite common all along. These are on a level below PhD.

Figure 1:
MPs with prior experience (absolute numbers)
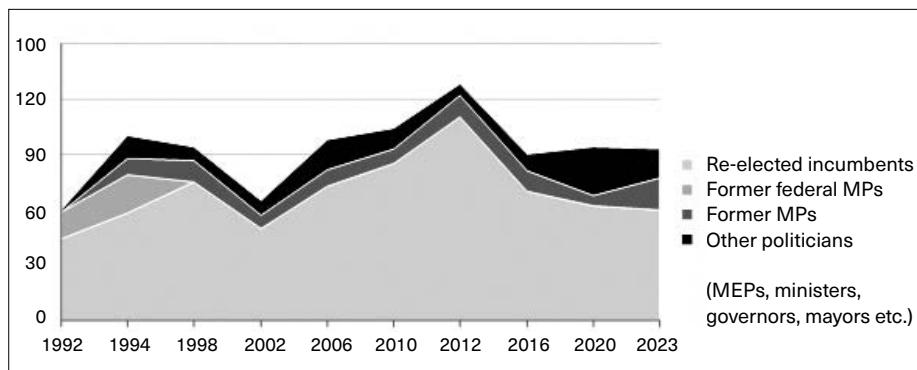
Figure 2:
Female MPs (%) – old versus new parties
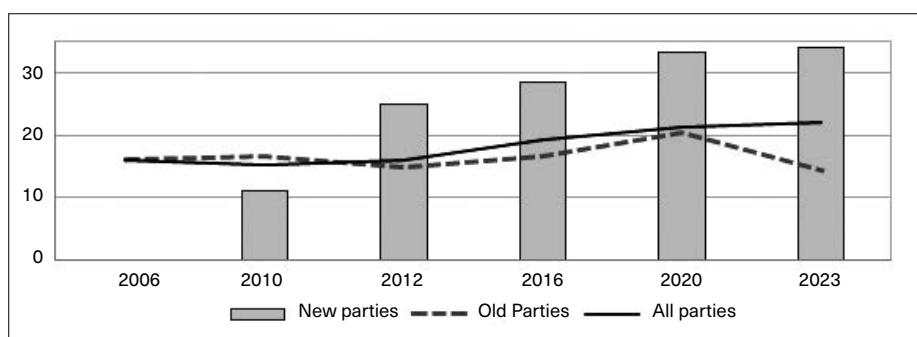

Figure 3:
**MPs by average age (in years) – old versus new parties**
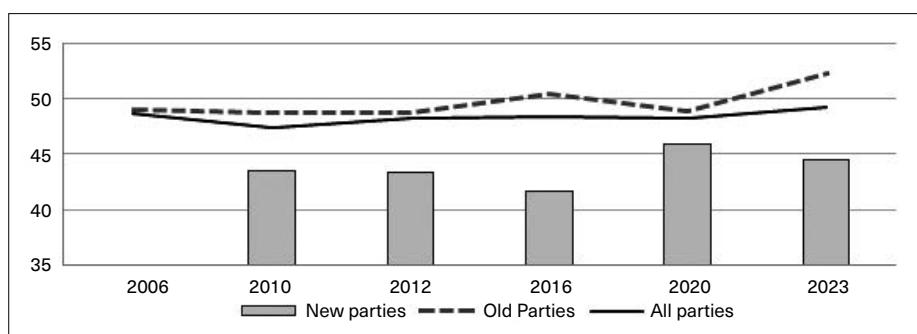
Figure 4:
University graduates among MPs (%) – old versus new parties
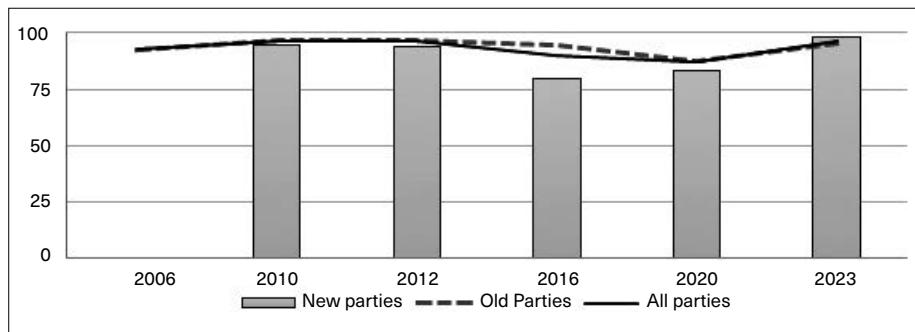
Figure 5:
MPs residing in the Bratislava region (%) – old versus new parties
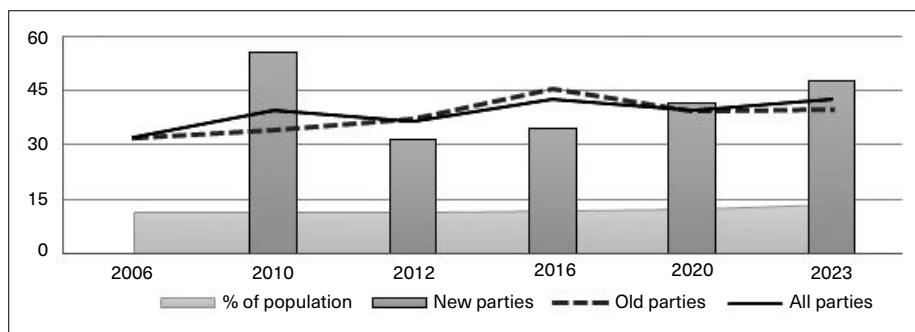
Figure 6:
New MPs by 5 largest occupation groups since 2006 (%)
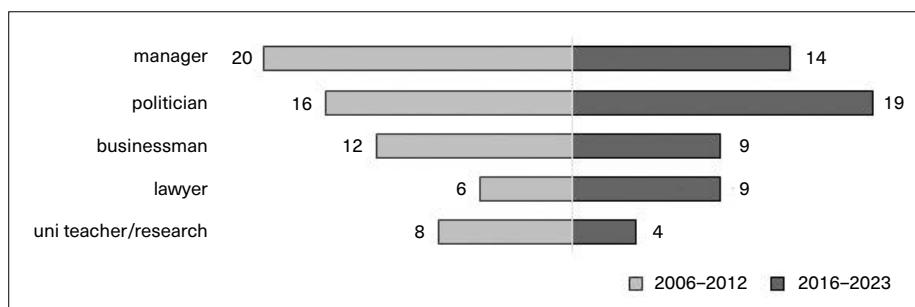
Source: the author and (for Figure 5 only) Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

Finally, while the number of ethnic Hungarian MPs remained historically low because no Hungarian party won representation, and national minorities generally are underrepresented, Roma representation peaked at six MPs, which is more than three times their official share of the population (Census, 2021). Five of the nine minority MPs (a Hungarian and four Roma) were elected for Ordinary People; in addition, two Roma were elected for Progressive Slovakia, a Ruthenian for Hlas, and a Ukrainian for SaS.

While the overall changes are limited, social bias varies across parties. The most striking difference between 'new' and more established parties is that newcomers have younger MPs. Progressive Slovakia had the youngest, at 42, while Hlas MPs were five years older (but under 44 if we exclude the 11 who left the Smer caucus). This is consistent with the difference I found between genuinely new parties and parties founded by elites who split off from an older party (Bakke, 2020). Conversely, Smer MPs were the oldest, followed by the MPs of the first-generation parties SNS and KDH. This age difference probably reflects the age profile of the members and activists and fits well with earlier findings that new parties tend to have younger members (cf. Heidar & Wauters, 2019).

Other differences evidently had little to do with newness. While new parties had scored below average on education in 2016 and 2020 (Figure 4), all except one Hlas MP were university graduates in 2023, and a full third of Hlas MPs and 22% of PS MPs even held a PhD degree. Moreover, Progressive Slovakia in practice accounted for most of the difference between old and new parties in terms of gender and place of residence (Figures 2 and 5): Its perfectly gender-balanced caucus comprised nearly half of the female MPs elected in 2023, and it had the second-highest share of Bratislava residents at 56%, only surpassed by SaS. Hlas, the other new party, scored well below average on both counts.

As expected, female representation varies across ideological party 'clusters' (Figure 7), but somewhat surprisingly the mainstream centre–right and populist parties (including HZDS) outperform social democracy, which has scored well below average in the last three parliamentary elections. Less surprising is the low female representation of nationalist and radical right parties, as well as of the conservative KDH and the two ethnic Hungarian parties (not in the figure; see also Bakke, 2012). To be sure, Smer is not a conventional social democratic party. Gender equality is not on the agenda, it never adopted post-materialist values (Zvada, 2023, p. 203), and since 2006 it has gradually moved closer to the TAN end of the GAL-TAN axis (see Chapel Hill Expert Survey). The strong performance of PS and the weaker performance of social democracy in Slovakia does suggest that libertarian parties may be more likely to promote gender equality than leftist parties (Keith & Verge, 2018, p. 401). Likewise, the fact that the dip in education level in 2016 and 2020 was primarily driven by populist parties and Kotleba's ĽSNS is also consistent with the finding that radical right voters and party members tend to be less well-educated.

The picture is more mixed when it comes to residence. Kotleba's party was the least Bratislava-dominated in 2016 and 2020 (Bakke, 2020). Conversely, mainstream centre-right parties are consistently the most Bratislava-dominated along with We are Family (not in the figure), while Smer (since 2010), Hlas, and Ordinary People have scored below average (Figure 9). Finally, social democratic and mainstream centre-right parties account for most of the strong presence of managers, politicians, and businessmen among MPs (Figure 10).

Figure 7:
Female MPs by party cluster (%)
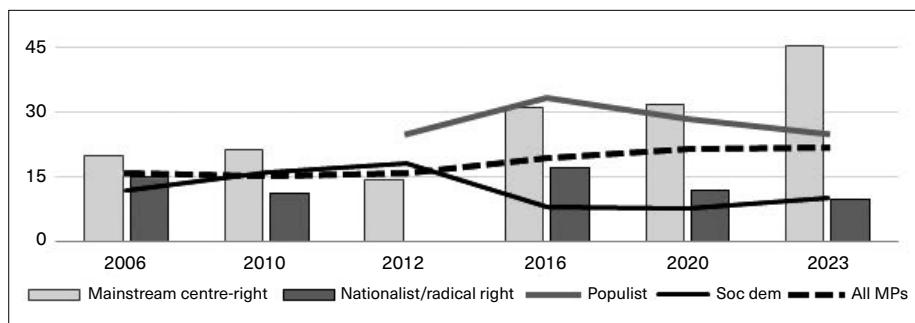
Figure 8:
University graduates among MPs by party cluster (%)
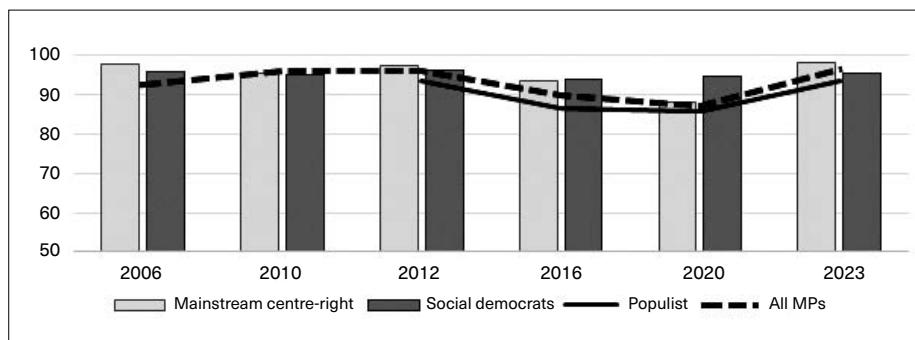
Bratislava residents among MPs by party cluster (%)
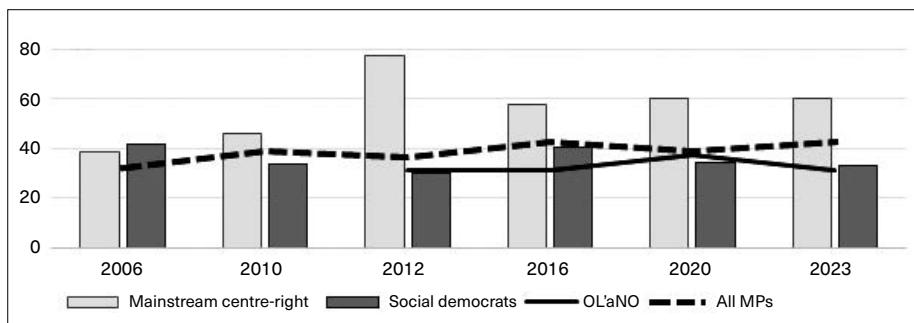
Figure 10:
New MPs by party cluster and profession group, 2006–2023 (%)

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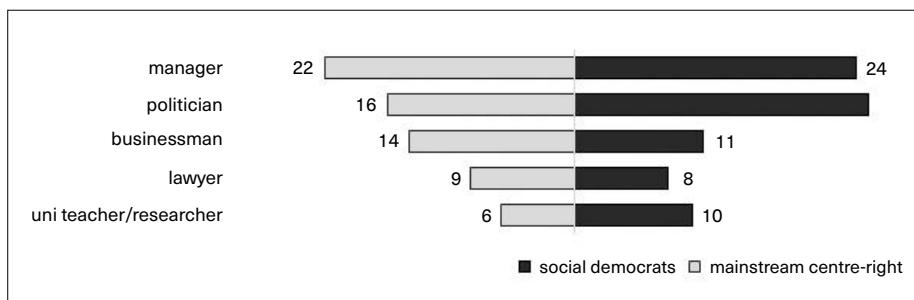
Source: the author.

5. How representative are Slovak MPs of their voters?

In this section I assess how representative the parliamentary elites of the current parliamentary parties are of their own voters. To do this, I compare my elite data to social background data for the parties, drawn from the exit poll conducted by the FOCUS agency for TV Markíza. The exit poll contains information on gender, age group, education, and nationality.[11] To make the age and education data more comparable, I amended the categories. The exit poll employs four age categories: 18–21 (first-time voters), 22–39, 40–59, and 60+. However, because all candidates

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11 The exit poll sample comprises 19,945 respondents in 170 wards, and the data have been weighed according to the actual election result. Data on selected professions were unusable because they did not comprise any of the profession groups in Figure 10.

are required by law to be over 21, figure 12 below combines the two youngest age categories into one 'under 40' category. The data also contain four education categories: elementary, secondary with and without graduation, and university education. Because the elite dataset only registers whether or not MPs are university graduates, the figure below only reports the results for the latter category.

A quick glance at the figures confirms that MPs are not representative even of their own party's voters. In terms of gender and education, Progressive Slovakia and SaS legislators match their voters best, while Smer, Hlas, and KDH have the least representative caucuses. Paradoxically, women are strongly underrepresented among the MPs of three of the four parties in which female voters constituted a majority (Smer, Hlas, and KDH); female representation was thus evidently not a priority for these voters. The two social democratic parties are also least representative of their voters in terms of education, followed by SNS and OĽaNO, while SaS and PS (as may be expected for centre-right parties catering to an urban electorate) have well-educated voters as well as MPs. Conversely, SNS and Smer match the age of their voters best, while the age distribution of the SaS and OĽaNO caucuses is quite far removed from their voters. Note that people under 40 are (in line with previous research) under-represented among the MPs of all parties. Finally, while Bratislava residents are strongly over-represented in all parties, the Smer, OĽaNO, and Hlas caucuses match their voters best. SaS stands out as the most Bratislava-dominated party in terms of voters as well as MPs.

When it comes to nationality, a huge majority of the voters of all parliamentary parties were (predictably) Slovaks. Part of the reason is that a majority of ethnic Hungarian voters voted for extra-parliamentary Hungarian parties. Only the OĽaNO alliance had a substantial share of minority voters: 6% were Hungarian, while 1% belonged to other minorities.

I now turn to the question of why social bias varies across parties, and I start with the three biggest parties.

Figure 11:
MPs and voters by gender, 2023 (%)
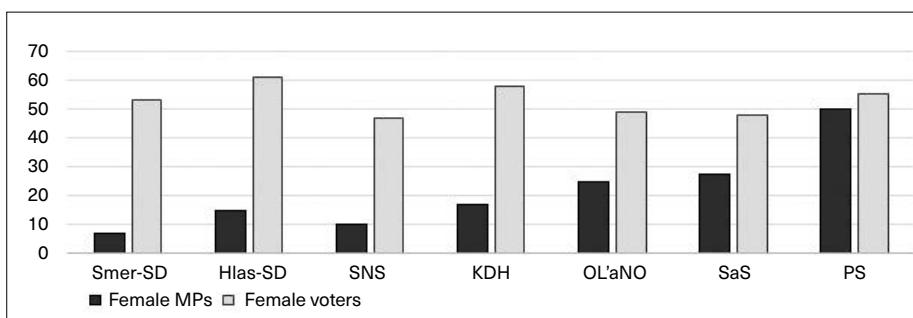
Figure 12:
MPs and voters by age group, 2023 (%)
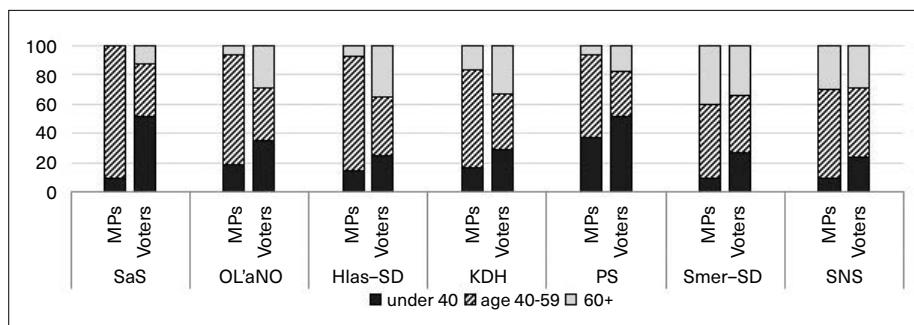
Figure 13:
MPs and voters by education, 2023 (%)
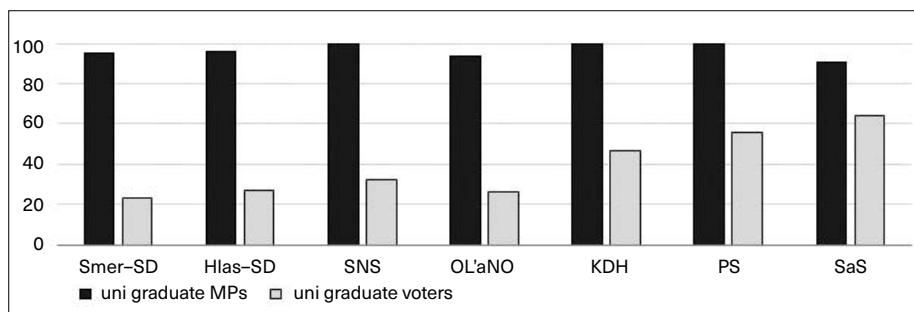
Figure 14:
Bratislava resident MPs and voters, 2023 (%)
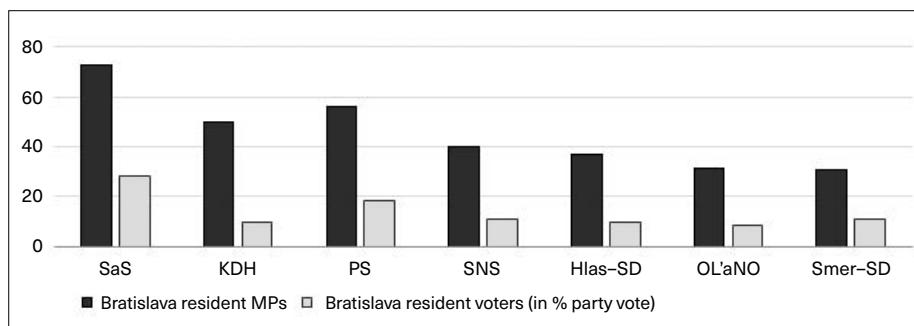
Source: the author and FOCUS exit poll for Markíza, 30 September, 2023.

6. The art of self-selection: Hlas, PS, and Smer

In this section I set out to explain differences in social bias between the three electorally most successful parties, using Norris and Lovenduski's model of candidate selection as a point of departure. To summarise, Smer legislators were on average eight years older than Hlas legislators; otherwise the profile of these two parties was similar although Hlas had higher female representation. By contrast, the caucus of Progressive Slovakia was on average 13 years younger than Smer legislators, perfectly gender balanced, and much more Bratislava-dominated. Apart from two MPs elected for Smer and one elected for Hlas, the caucuses of all three parties consisted of university graduates, and a substantial share even held PhDs. The main difference was of course the share of professional politicians: Of the MPs elected for Smer, 62% were incumbents and an additional 19% were former MPs or professional politicians. Among Hlas MPs, 41% were incumbents and another 18% were experienced politicians, which is still high for a new party. By contrast, PS had one incumbent MP (3%) and six other experienced politicians (19%). Those who were not politicians generally came from white-collar or high-status occupations.

How can these differences in social bias be explained? First, preference votes had no impact whatsoever on who was elected in any of the parties. There were some reshuffles, but only between candidates who were ranked high enough to be elected anyway. Second, candidate selection is equally centralised and exclusive in all three parties: the party leader compiles and ranks the list, and the presidium adopts it. In the case of Progressive Slovakia in 2023, this applied only to the first 30 slots, while three members of the presidium were tasked with completing the rest of the list. Local chairmen (PS) or regional chairmen (Hlas) participate in the vetting of candidates; in the case of Smer, regional branches also rank candidates from their own region. The formal decision-making body was nevertheless the same. This leaves two principal explanations: either the pool of aspirants, or the party-specific nomination criteria and the trade-off between them (or both) differ systematically between parties.

Unfortunately, precise information on aspirants is virtually impossible to find. To receive state subsidies, parties are only obliged to report total membership, not to keep records of the gender, age, or education of their members – although most of them collect this information (membership applicants must fill in a form and often even attach a CV). Moreover, even if party membership were an absolute eligibility criterion (which is certainly not the case)[12], it would still

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12 The precise share of non-party members is hard to assess because party membership is no longer reported on the ballot paper. In 2002 (the last election it was reported), independents did not exceed 8% for any parliamentary party. However, the frequency may be higher now, especially in parties with low membership.

be difficult to separate the willing from the eligible. Of the three large parties, only Progressive Slovakia could provide recent social background information: 'Perhaps a third' of the party members were women, most were in their 30s or 40s, and 'basically everybody' had higher education. About a third of the members expressed their interest in being on the list (interview, PS, 16 June 2023) – which is a higher share than in Denmark (cf. Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). Hlas does not register this information centrally, and Smer did not respond to my enquiry, but had around 30% female members in 2010 (Smer party headquarters).[13]

If we turn to individual selection criteria, all three parties emphasised active participation in party work, Smer and PS also experience from regional and municipal assemblies, while incumbency naturally was more important for Smer and Hlas. All 11 Hlas incumbents were re-elected, and all but one Smer incumbent (who did not run). Moreover, all three considered expertise to be important. For Smer, an academic title was not enough; the candidate must also have worked politically within his or her field of expertise (Smer, interview, 26 May 2008). For Hlas, university education 'did not hurt', but was by no means a condition (Hlas, interview, 17 July 2023). For PS, it was more important that candidates possessed 'skills or experience' the party needed. My informant added apologetically that most of the members were university graduates, so this could not be used to tell them apart (PS, interview, 16 June 2023). PS also mentioned communication skills and media appeal; it wanted candidates to share its values (especially human rights); and it tried to avoid people who were known for creating their own campaign, were hard to work with, or communicated on social media in unhelpful ways.

As for list balancing criteria, only Progressive Slovakia aimed for gender balance, whereas all three parties strived for some measure of regional balance, but without using geography as a ranking criterion. PS reportedly wanted the list to be as diverse as possible, in terms of region, age, and gender, and also had Roma and LGBT people high enough on the list to be elected. While confessing that it had been hard work, my PS informant was visibly proud of the party's perfectly gender balanced list. 'Men are more eager to run, while women must be persuaded that it is possible, that they are qualified, etc. First, we decided to aim for 40%, but that was quite easy, so we decided it would look good if we went for 50–50. With the zipper system, women are not just in the bottom part of the list. We are actually pioneers since we also have quotas in the party presidium. We have two male and two female chairpersons, and a great, highly professional, balanced presidium' (PS, interview, 16 June 2023). By contrast, Smer and Hlas did not have gender quotas, and female candidates were on average ranked lower

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13 Scattered data from the last two decades suggest that most parties in Slovakia, as in Western Europe, are male dominated. The share of female members was 16% for SaS (2024), around 35% for SDKÚ (2010), and 39% for HZDS (2010). SNS before the merger with PSNS (49% in 2004), and KDH (55% in 2010) were exceptions.

on the list than their male counterparts; together this explains the difference in female representation. In fact, the highest ranked female Smer candidate was number 33!

What did it take to get a high enough rank on the list to be elected? Surprisingly, the answer is the same for all three parties, but it was the interview with Hlas that solved the puzzle: 'The chairman proposed the list according to the following key: first the chairman, then the vice-chairmen and the rest of the presidium, then regional chairmen' (Hlas, interview, 17 July 2023). In other words, the presidium nominated itself. In the case of Hlas, 24 of the 27 MPs were members of the presidium or regional chairmen. Of the remaining three, two were former high-ranking politicians of the party Good Choice (Dobrá voľba), which had merged with Hlas in the run-up to the election, and one was a former Olympic silver medallist.

Likewise, 19 of the 20 members of the PS presidium were elected (one was an MEP and did not run). PS made sure to have experts in all fields within the first 30 slots (the number of seats the party realistically hoped to win), that were also diverse in terms of age, gender, and region. This included some public figures and experts in fields in which the party lacked competence, about five of whom were not party members (PS, interview, 16 June 2023). Most of the remaining 13 MPs were thus the party's experts in various fields, including a former police-force president. There were also two Roma and two openly gay people among them.

Finally, in the case of Smer, the presidium naturally comprised a lower share of the MPs, but 22 of 23 presidium members (including regional chairmen) ran and were elected. Of the 42 MPs elected for Smer, 33 were either incumbents, presidium members, or both. Among the nine exceptions were a former chief of police, the Smer spokesman, the current chief of staff at the PM's office, a former MP and mayor, and two females – one of whom was young. When I interviewed Smer in 2008, the most important criterion for being allotted a high ranking was expertise in combination with dedication to the party. A video interview with former vice-chairman Robert Kaliňák (Pravda, 2 August, 2023) suggests that Smer and Hlas use the same ranking criteria.

In short, the selectorates selected themselves, and the social bias of the respective caucuses (and the differences between them) mainly reflects who the presidium members were. This is of course most striking in the case of Hlas. In Progressive Slovakia, the decision to employ the zipper system to ensure gender balance, as well as the emphasis on diversity, had an impact beyond this. Finally, the emphasis on incumbency strengthened the profile of Smer as a party of professional politicians. At the same time, the few exceptions suggest that even Smer tried to improve its social profile by nominating women and younger people.

7. The last will be first, or intervention of the voters

In the 2023 election, a record-high number of MPs were elected because of preference votes. In this section I investigate why the impact of preference votes increased, and then turn to whether and how this influenced the social bias of the parliamentary elites. Do flexible lists help or hinder descriptive representation in Slovakia?

First, the overall effect of preference votes on the composition of the parliamentary elites in Slovakia has been low in most elections (Table 2). Moreover, OĽaNO has accounted for much of the increase since 2010. High district magnitude (and before 2006 high thresholds) in combination with ballot position effects explain why the voters have had very little influence on the composition of the parliamentary elites. Top-ranked candidates typically have a better chance of getting preference votes than lower-ranked candidates: the list leader normally gets the highest share of preference votes, and the average number of votes drops rapidly after the first 10–15 candidates. The voters thus to a large extent *confirm* the priorities of the party selectorates. Arguably, this even applies to the habitual re-election of Igor Matovič and other high-ranking OĽaNO politicians running from the bottom of the list.

Second, however, large parties (defined as parties that won 25 seats or more in that particular election) have empirically been much less vulnerable to voter interventions than smaller parties, for two reasons: voters of larger parties tend to cast preference votes for top-ranked candidates, and besides, altering the ranking of the first 25+ candidates makes no difference. In fact, Smer has never had a single MP elected due to preference votes, and neither did HZDS while it was still a big party. OĽaNO, the 2020 election winner, was seemingly an exception, but a closer look reveals that all the seven MPs who owed their election to the voters were incumbents who ran from the bottom of the list. This shows that the ballot position effect is contingent on the nomination practices of the parties: a party leader running from the bottom of the list will still draw a large number of preference votes.

Table 2:
MPs elected because of preference votes (absolute numbers)

	2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	2023
Elected due to preference votes	1	7	11	15	13	15	25
– OĽaNO				5	8	7	10
– SaS			4	3		2	4
– SNS			1		2		8
– KDH		4	1	2			3
– MK/Most–Híd	1	2	4	2	1		
Female MPs, net effect	-1	2	-1	-2	-4	-2	0
University degree, net effect	1	0	3	1	2	1	-1
Incumbent MPs, net effect	0	0	-1	4	6	10	2
Average age, net effect (years)	-1.0	3.7	1.4	-3.5	5.7	4.0	4.2

Source: Own calculations based on volby.statistics.sk. The threshold for preference votes to take effect was 10% until 2002, and has been 3% since 2006.

Historically, preference votes have thus primarily influenced the composition of the caucuses of smaller parties. In 2023, a little over half of the MPs elected for the four smallest parties and alliances won representation from otherwise unelectable slots. The voters thus disrupted the ranking of all four. Moreover, all the MPs of these parties, as well as 4–6 substitutes in three of the parties, got more than the 3% preference votes needed to advance on the list. The result was most dramatic for SNS, where eight of ten MPs owed their election to preference votes. Moreover, four of these advanced from slots below #100, and the same applies to two of the three first substitutes. Likewise, ten of the 16 MPs of the OĽaNO alliance were elected due to preference votes, and the same applies to four of 11 SaS MPs and three of 12 KDH MPs (Table 2). In all four cases the bottom-ranked candidate was elected (Figure 15). This may be a double contagion effect from OĽaNO: parties put high-profile candidates in the last slot, and voters elect them.

Why did the impact of preference voting increase in 2023? First, in the case OĽaNO, the main reason for the high number of MPs elected because of preference votes was, as always, the idiosyncratic nomination practice of this 'party' (incumbents running from the bottom). The election of four Roma candidates from otherwise unelectable slots was nevertheless a distinctive feature of the 2023 election. All four represented the platform Pačivale Roma (responsible, decent, or honest Roma), and only one of them was an incumbent. This was widely interpreted as a result of strong mobilisation in the Roma communities which arguably helped the OĽaNO alliance over the electoral threshold (Vančo & Kozinková, 2023, see also map).

Figure 15:
Preference votes by ballot position (%) and number of parties where the candidate got more than 3% (right axis)
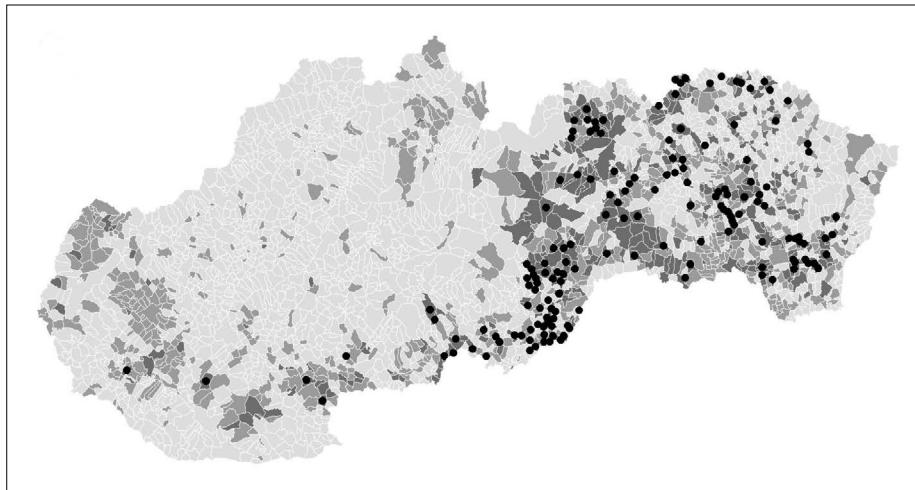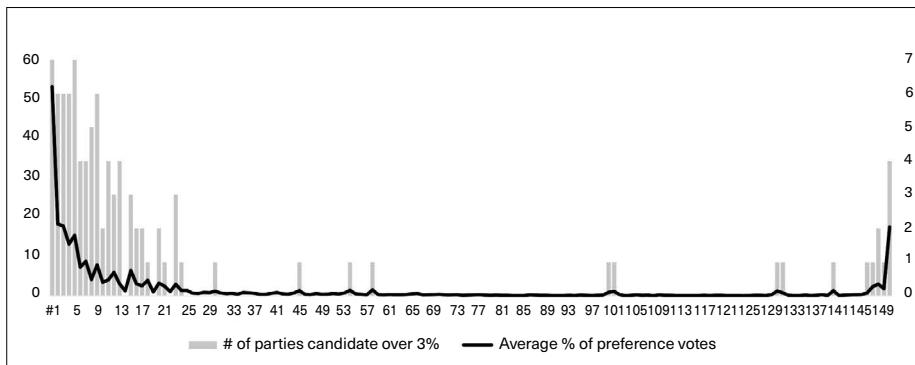
Source: Vančo & Kozinková (2023). OĽaNO strongholds (grey) and Roma settlements (black dots).

Second, the fate of SNS is an extreme example of the dangers involved in allowing members of other parties or groups onto the list. Informal electoral alliances have indeed been one of the main drivers of preference voting in Slovakia. In 2010, for instance, both newcomers allowed organised groups onto their lists. Besides the four future founding members of OĽaNO on the SaS list, four members of the Civic Conservative Party (OKS) were elected for Most–Híd, one of whom was ranked high enough to be elected even without preference votes.[14] However, preference votes had an unprecedented impact on the SNS caucus in 2023.

A few months before the election, SNS polled well below the electoral threshold, and in order to mobilise nationally oriented voters, its chairman Andrej Danko invited representatives of other, electorally marginal, far-right parties and groups to join the list. Leading figures of Život, National Coalition, and Slovak Patriot were presented at a press conference on 21 May 2023.[15] Several of these also took an active part in the electoral campaign, but only Život had candidates among the top ten. However, while helping SNS over the threshold, this strategy backfired: Danko was the only SNS member to win a seat, the National Coalition got two, and Život three MPs (all incumbents), while the Slovak Patriots got the second and third substitute.[16] The remaining MPs were three independents supported by the far-right National Revival, and a high-profile TV presenter and former MP for We are Family.

As for the remaining two parties, name recognition is a likely explanation: in the case of SaS, two incumbents (the OKS chairman and a transfer from For the People), a health professional, and a well-known former MP and KDH chairman were elected out of turn; in the case of KDH, the same applies to a well-known former MP and MEP, a long-time mayor, and a profiled health professional whose last name happens to be the same as the chairman's (no relation).[17]

Next, the question is what impact voter intervention had on the social bias of the parliamentary elites. The short answer is: very limited (Table 2). The overall effect on female representation is slightly negative and was zero in 2023. The voters strengthened the educational bias and reduced elite turnover slightly, and in most elections MPs who owed their position to the voters were on average older

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14 The voters also helped the OKS chairman win re-election for SaS in 2020 and 2023; father and son Kuffa (Život) depended on preference votes to win seats for Kotleba's party in 2020; and members of NOVA, Change from Below, Christian Union, and (in a formal alliance in 2023), For the People won seats on the OĽaNO ballot in 2016, 2020, and 2023.

15 See the footage of the press conference at Andrej Danko's Facebook page (in Slovak), here: https://www.facebook.com/andrej.danko.71/videos/1407177353435605.

16 In Slovakia an MP must relinquish his or her seat temporarily while serving in the government (as minister or state secretary) or permanently if elected president, MEP, or appointed to certain public offices. In the meantime s/he is replaced by a substitute. It therefore matters who the substitutes (especially of government parties) are. None of the figures in this article include substitutes.

17 Fun fact: two of the MPs elected due to preference votes for Kotleba's party were his brothers. One was elected in 2016 and the other in 2020.

than the candidates they replaced. In 2023 this was primarily driven by OĽaNO and SaS, whose deselected candidates were 10 and six years younger, respectively, than the MPs elected due to preference votes.

Beyond the slight changes in social bias, what would the caucuses of the four smallest parties have looked like in 2023 without voter intervention? When I cross-checked the original ranking of the candidate lists against the lists of presidium members, I found evidence of self-selection also in these parties, albeit to a varying extent. If the voters had not intervened, eight SNS presidium members would have been elected, along with two from Život. Voter intervention resulted in the de-selection of seven presidium members for SNS, while the smaller parties gained three. The original ranking was consistent with the nomination practice described in 2017, when the SNS hierarchy was used as a point of departure: first the chairman, then the vice-chairmen and the regional chairmen (SNS, interview, 7 March 2017). Likewise, KDH presidium members (three of whom were deselected) occupied nine of the top 12 slots on the party list. Besides being a member of the presidium, the most important criterion to get a high ranking was to be a well-known expert on a current issue of importance to the voters (KDH, interview, 20 May, 2024). In the case of SaS, expertise, celebrity, and the ability to promote the party's goals if elected are decisive for a high ranking. The party chairman was list leader, followed by eight team leaders in various fields of expertise (SaS, interview, 20 May, 2024). All four presidium members (one was deselected) were nevertheless ranked among the top nine, along with two additional members of the Council (the party executive). Besides presidium members the top-ranked KDH and SaS candidates were (former) MPs or experts.

Finally, the OĽaNO alliance is (unsurprisingly) partially an exception. The presidium members were divided between the top 20 and the bottom of the list: the four party leaders ran from the bottom, three presidium members were among the top seven, and the rest occupied the slots from slot ten onwards. The MEP Peter Pollák senior was the only member of the OĽaNO presidium who did not run. The net effect of preference votes was two deselected presidium members for OĽaNO. A closer look at the original ranking reveals that OĽaNO is now a party of professional politicians. In previous elections, the chairman Igor Matovič chose people from outside politics as mock list leaders, and the top-ranked candidates were 'ordinary people'. After a profiled male list leader quit in disgust less than five weeks before the 2012 election (Balogová, 2012), Matovič opted for rather untried female list leaders in 2016 and 2020. However, in 2023 he somewhat surprisingly went with co-founder Erika Jurinová, the governor of Žilina. In addition to Jurinová and a second founding member and governor (Jozef Viskupič), the top ten included the general secretary, two young MPs' assistants, the leader of the media team, a former state secretary, and two incumbents who were also former ministers. Moreover, incumbents and former ministers occupied the slots from nine onwards.

8. Summary and conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated, first, that MPs of (genuinely) new parties still differ from MPs of more established parties primarily in terms of age (Bakke, 2020), while differences between parliamentary elites in terms of gender, education, profession, and place of residence seem to be more associated with party clusters. Perhaps a little surprisingly, Slovak main-stream centre-right and populist parties score better than social democrats on gender balance. The strong performance of PS and the weak performance of Smer (and Hlas) in 2023 suggest that libertarian parties may be more likely to promote gender equality than leftist parties, which is consistent with the findings of Keith and Verge (2018, p. 401).

Second, as expected, none of the current parties' parliamentary elites are particularly representative of their own voters. There are nevertheless some interesting patterns. The main-stream centre-right PS and SaS appeal to young, urban professionals, and are predictably the most Bratislava-dominated in terms of voters as well as MPs. Both parties have well-educated voters as well as MPs, and the same applies to their members (party interviews). They are also the two parties that match their voters best in terms of gender. Conversely, the parties of the current government coalition (Smer, Hlas, and SNS) diverge most from their voters in terms of gender and education, while SNS and Smer are closer to their voters in terms of age. Most current parliamentary parties are to some extent generational parties.

Third, self-selection is the main reason for the differences in social bias between the three electorally most successful parties, and to some extent even between the smaller parties (see below). Apart from KDH, all seven parliamentary parties have equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive nomination processes, where the party executive adopts the list. In the case of the three largest parties, the single most important qualification needed to make it into the top 20 was in practice to be a presidium member: this especially applies to Hlas, where all top 20 candidates were members of the presidium – in the case of PS and Smer, the same applies to 18 and 15 of 20, respectively. The age and gender profiles of the three parties thus to a considerable extent reflected who the members of the respective presidia (and in the case of Smer the incumbents) were. Beyond this, however, the strong emphasis on expertise and experience explains the strong educational and professional credentials of the MPs of all three parties, and in the case of PS, the decision to use the zipper system explains the party's perfectly gender balanced caucus. Selection criteria (and the pool of aspirants) thus matter more than selection mode as such.

Fourth, the voters had limited influence on the composition of the parliamentary elites in most elections. Despite the record-high number of MPs elected due to preference votes, the impact on social bias was marginal even in 2023, with the exception of age. Voter preferences nevertheless mitigated the effect of self-se-

lection in the four smallest parties and alliances somewhat – most dramatically for SNS, where seven presidium members were deselected. Based on the original ranking, presidium membership was clearly a key qualification in both SNS and KDH. SaS prioritised 'expertise, celebrity, and the ability to promote the party's goals' (SaS, interview, 20 May, 2024), but all four presidium members were ranked among the top ten. The OĽaNO alliance is partially an exception, in the sense that presidium members were divided between the top and the bottom of the list.

Finally, the analysis has demonstrated that the impact of preference votes is contingent on nomination practices. Whether parties put their most well-known and experienced people in the top of the list (like Smer and Hlas in 2023) or in the bottom of the list (like OĽaNO in all elections since 2012), these candidates draw the most preference votes. Interestingly, the idiosyncratic nomination practice of OĽaNO seems to generate a double contagion effect: the smaller parties put profiled candidates in slot number 150, and the voters elect them. Besides this, however, the main driver of preference votes in Slovakia has been informal electoral alliances. This is when a party allows members of other, electorally marginal parties or organised groups onto the list in order to increase its own chances in the election, while giving the 'guest' candidates the opportunity to win a seat through preference votes. SNS in 2023 is an extreme example of the dangers involved. What went wrong? First, SNS allowed not only one, but several parties and groups onto the list. Second, leading figures of the other parties were more visible in the SNS campaign than many of the not-too-profiled SNS presidium members among the top ten. Most importantly, under a flexible list system, the relative strength of the parties in the alliance and the number of candidates for each party matter. Unless the 'host' party is much more popular than the other parties in the alliance (which was not the case here), a large number of candidates will be a disadvantage because it makes it more difficult for the voters to concentrate preference votes (see Balík & Hruška, 2022, for a Czech example).

Party names and acronyms

Aliancia	Hungarian Alliance, merger of Hungarian Community and Bridge (Most–Híd)
Hlas-SD	Voice – Social Democrats
HZDS	Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
KDH	Christian Democratic Movement
MK	Hungarian Coalition, later renamed Hungarian Community
Most–Híd	Bridge
OKS	Civic Conservative Party

OĽaNO	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, renamed 'Slovakia' in 2023
PS	Progressive Slovakia
Republika	Republic
SaS	Freedom and Solidarity
SDKÚ	Slovak Democratic and Christian Union
Sme Rodina	We are Family
Smer-SD	Direction – Social Democrats
SNS	Slovak National Party

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Mobile Voters: Patterns of Electoral Volatility in Slovakia[1]

Oľga Gyárfášová, Roman Hlatky, Martin Slosiarik[2]

Abstract

Electoral volatility is a perennial feature of Slovak general elections. Furthermore, volatility has increased over time, suggesting party-system stabilization is unlikely. As the vicious cycle of new party emergence continues, high volatility complicates the attribution of responsibility, and thus accountability. The 2023 early general election found Slovakia in a very precarious political and social situation – trust in political institutions was historically low and public sentiment about future prospects was pessimistic. Focusing on this election, and using aggregate election results as well as exit poll data, this study analyses: (1) trends in volatility; (2) dynamics of volatility within and between two major political blocs; (3) individual vote switching between consecutive elections; (4) the vote choice of remobilized former non-voters; and (5) the motivations that underpin vote switching. The findings indicate that although some voters have made ideological commitments to certain political parties and are therefore loyal between elections, large parts of the electorate remain 'floating voters', dissatisfied with political parties generally. As such, volatility is at an all-time high and may increase in future elections.

Key words: Slovakia; voting; elections; volatility; aggregate volatility; individual volatility; intra-bloc volatility; inter-bloc volatility; polarization

2   Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava, e-mail: olga.gyarfasova@uniba.sk, ORCID: 0000-0003-0016-7866. Department of Political Science, University of North Texas, e-mail: roman.hlatky@unt.edu, ORCID: 0000-0001-8378-2877. FOCUS Agency, Bratislava, e-mail: martin.slosiarik@focus-research.sk, ORCID: 0009-0001-6979-8992.

1. Introduction

Due to complex transitions to political plurality, party systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are generally more unstable than their West European counterparts (cf. Bakke & Sitter, 2005; Sikk, 2005; Tavits, 2005, 2008; Powell & Tucker, 2009, 2014; Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015, 2020). Much of the research on this instability has focused on the overall fluidity of party systems, the frequent emergence and electoral success of new political parties, and voter transitions between parties. These patterns of instability have even led scholars to characterize CEE party systems with metaphors from the field of natural disasters – e.g., 'hurricane season' (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015) – or to write about the 'stability of instability' (Haughton, 2014) and the 'strength of instability' (Gyárfášová et al., 2017).

Slovakia – due to its 'zig-zagging' path to consolidated democracy (Szomolányi, 1999) – is a common case study for research focusing on the causes of instability and for demonstrating and clarifying the general features of volatility during the CEE transition to democracy. When it comes to the volatility of voter decisions in Slovakia, scholarship has focused on the fact that the Slovak political system has long been divided into two polarized, antagonistic blocs. Thus, previous studies differentiate between intra-bloc and inter-bloc volatility. Findings suggest that volatility occurs more frequently within political blocs, and that moves between blocs are less frequent (Baboš & Malová, 2013; Bútorová et al., 2012; Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020). However, given the frequency of new party emergence in Slovakia (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020), another type of volatility is also relevant: the movement of voters from existing blocs to organizationally new parties that enter the 'in-between-space' of the dominant conflict (Haughton et al., 2016; Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020; Powell & Tucker, 2014).

In this article, we build on earlier work and analyse electoral volatility between the 2020 and the 2023 Slovak general elections. We focus on: (1) trends in volatility; (2) dynamics of intra- and inter-bloc volatility; (3) individual vote switching between consecutive elections; (4) the vote choice of remobilized former non-voters; and (5) the motivations that underpin vote switching. We base our analyses on data from an exit poll survey conducted on 30 September 2023 by Focus for TV Markíza and earlier exit polls conducted by the same agency.

Our analyses offer four conclusions. First, electoral volatility – whether aggregate (net) or individual (gross) – reached the highest level since Slovakia's transition from state socialism in 1989 (the founding election in 1990 aside). We suggest that the drastic collapse of voter support for OĽaNO, the emergence of Peter Pellegrini's Hlas as a viable, left-wing alternative to Smer, Smer's radicalization on sociocultural issues and foreign policy, and Hlas and Smer's ability to remobilize voters who stayed home in 2020 are responsible.

Second, voter loyalty was positively correlated with both programmatic and ideological motivations. The most substantive motivations associated with

supporting the same party in 2020 and 2023 were that the party: (1) fights corruption; (2) fights high prices; (3) is socially liberal; and (4) is socially conservative. Thus, it appears that some parties have built certain programmatic and ideological brands that help them maintain a core, loyal electorate – e.g., OĽaNO as an anti-corruption movement, KDH as a religious party, or Smer as the guarantor of a strong, social state.

Third, in 2023, both Smer and Hlas successfully mobilized voters who stayed home in the 2020 election. These remobilized voters were motivated by the leaders of the two parties, echoing findings from previous work on Slovakia's highly personalized party system (Gyárfášová & Hlatky, 2023). The remobilization of former non-voters may indicate that, after the tumultuous years of OĽaNO-led governance, segments of the Slovak electorate are willing to forget the events that led to Smer's loss in the 2020 election. Moreover, these voters also indicated that they supported Hlas and Smer because the parties represented the 'lesser evil'. In fact, the 'lesser evil' justification was the most frequently mentioned motivation amongst all respondents, not just those who supported Hlas and Smer. Importantly, this motivation is positively associated with vote-switching between elections. This association suggests that while segments of the Slovak electorate may have ideological commitments that lead to consistent choices between elections, a substantially larger portion of the electorate is composed of 'floating' voters without firm commitments to any party. In 2023, these voters were convinced by Hlas and Smer.

Finally – and more broadly – our results indicate that high levels of electoral volatility in Slovakia are not solely a product of new party entry (e.g., Powell & Tucker, 2014). Only one 'new' party surpassed the representation threshold in the 2023 election; and, given the strong organizational and personal continuity between Hlas and Smer, the extent to which Hlas can be considered 'new' is debatable. Moreover, the 2023 election saw volatility reach an all-time high, providing suggestive evidence that democratic longevity may not be as stabilizing of a factor as once thought (e.g., Tavits, 2005). In fact, given the substantial portion of voters without loyal commitments to parties, volatility may further increase in subsequent elections. These results suggest that the stability and institutionalization of parties may be the most relevant factors for explaining electoral volatility (Casal Bértoa et al., 2024). Only when parties present a coherent, ideologically rooted message over multiple electoral cycles, can we expect voter loyalty to develop and persist.

In the next section, we proceed with a discussion of the various conceptualizations of volatility and review related literature. We briefly discuss research that focuses specifically on electoral volatility in Slovakia before turning to a discussion of the political and social contexts of the 2023 Slovak election. The subsequent section introduces our methodology and presents results. We conclude with a discussion of our findings.

2. Conceptualizing and measuring volatility

Haughton and Deegan-Krause suggest that 'volatility is the most frequently used quantitative tool to assess and compare the degree of continuity and change in party system[s]' (2020, p. 94). The importance of measuring volatility is also emphasized by Casal Bértoa et al.: 'Scholars agree that volatility in political party systems matters for democracy, and they use calculations of party vote shares as an indicator of a wide variety of phenomena and as an independent variable in studies about the health of democracy' (2017, p. 143). Tavits underscores the consequences of volatility, saying that: 'Unpredictable fluctuations of voter decisions do not allow political parties to make long-term political commitments, which are necessary for the stable development of politics' (2005, p. 283). Voter volatility affects not only the quality of representation, but also the quality, stability, and predictability of governance and policymaking.

There are two main approaches for measuring volatility. Aggregate or net volatility uses aggregate election results and expresses summarized changes in political party support between two consecutive elections. Individual or gross volatility uses individual data from surveys and expresses overall change caused by voter transfers between individual parties. While there are two different approaches for calculating volatility, 'Pedersen's index remains the starting point for most attempts to capture electoral volatility' (Casal Bértoa et al., 2017, p. 142). The Pedersen index measures electoral volatility in party systems by calculating 'the net change within the electoral party system resulting from individual vote transfers' (Pedersen, 1979). Differences in calculations stem from variations in how scholars deal with party mergers and splits, as well as organizational and personnel-related discontinuities in party structures. Importantly, the literature 'offers little guidance' about setting relevant 'thresholds that separate continuity from discontinuity' (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020, p. 31). It is particularly difficult to determine these boundaries in fluid party systems, like those in CEE.

Nonetheless, scholarship has settled on two main methods for identifying the thresholds and boundaries of party change: linkage and inclusive aggregation. The linkage method focuses on identifying party continuity over time. A strict linkage approach considers any splits or mergers involving a name change or other significant alteration between *t-1* and *t* as a new party – i.e., one with no formal linkage to predecessors or successors. A relaxed linkage approach treats party name changes continuously, and when a party splits or merges, the largest predecessor and successor are considered linked, while other parties are considered unlinked (Casal Bértoa et al., 2017, pp. 147–148).

The inclusive aggregation method (Casal Bértoa et al., 2017, p. 148), also called the combined votes method (Sikk & Köker, 2019, pp. 764–767), accounts for the volatility induced by the behaviour of political elites. Therefore, changes

in voting patterns due to party mergers and splits are not considered volatility. Party rebranding and joint electoral list formation are considered continuities of the parties involved. As such, this type of volatility reflects vote switching between non-continuous parties rather than organizational changes orchestrated by party leaders (Linek and Gyárfášová, 2020, p. 308). Consequently, inclusive aggregation leads to more conservative volatility estimates than the linkage methods. Due to the major splits that occurred in Slovakia's party system between the 2020 and 2023 elections (Hlas and Smer, Republika and ĽSNS, and – to a lesser extent – Demokrati and OĽaNO), we apply the strict linkage method as it accounts for electoral shifts between predecessor parties and their splinters. We return to this point in greater detail below.

2.1 Disaggregating volatility

To make volatility estimates more precise and useful, the scholarship has further disaggregated the measure. Powell and Tucker (2009) introduced Type A and Type B Volatility. The former captures extra-system volatility: vote switching to new parties and away from disappearing parties. The latter measures volatility amongst stable parties. In other words, Type A Volatility refers to volatility caused by '**A** new party', while Type B Volatility refers to volatility '**B**etween existing parties' (Powell & Tucker, 2009, p. 2). An analysis of 80 pairs of elections in 21 post-communist countries (including Slovakia) demonstrated that much of what was previously labelled simple electoral volatility in post-communist countries is Type A Volatility (Powell & Tucker, 2009). For example, between 1992 and 2006, the average net volatility in Slovakia was 51%; yet, 42% was accounted for by Type A Volatility (Powell & Tucker, 2009, p. 31).

Another disaggregation of volatility focuses on the difference between intra-bloc and inter-bloc volatility. This approach can be traced back to Bartolini and Mair (1990), who focused on the volatility of Western European party systems and voters (cf. Linek et al., 2023). This disaggregation became relevant for characterizing dynamics in fragmented and volatile post-communist party systems. As suggested by the authors of the extensive comparative project *The Post-Communist Party System*, inter-bloc volatility reflects chaotic dynamics within the party system, as large segments of the electorate shift between blocs and established or new parties. In such patterns of 'deep' (rather than 'shallow') volatility, the electorate is susceptible to a wide range of appeals and is not engaged in structured party relations (Kitschelt et al., 1999, p. 400).

A final type of volatility concerns the switch between voting and not voting. As Linek et al. (2023) argue, these changes in participation are relevant for volatility. Voters can be demobilized, remobilized, or first-time eligible. Demobilized voters are those who, after having voted in the previous election, decide

not to participate in the current election. Remobilized voters are individuals who did not cast ballots in the previous election, but have cast ballots in the past, and do so again in the current election. First-time eligible voters are those who can cast ballots for the very first time – i.e., those who have recently turned the voting age. This heterogeneity of action encompasses the full range of decisions available to voters, and we consider such decisions important in the investigation of voter volatility (Linek et. al, 2023, pp. 34-35). Moreover – and as is often the case in Slovakia – patterns of mobilization and demobilization can have consequential impacts on election results. In this study, we focus on individual-level (gross) volatility, analysing the motivations that underpin not only vote switching between parties, but also the decisions of former non-voters to once again cast their ballots. We also distinguish between shallow, intra-bloc volatility and deep, inter-bloc volatility.

4. The 2023 election: context, key results, and aftermath

Prior to discussing the context of the 2023 election, we overview some of the literature that focuses on electoral volatility in Slovakia. Baboš and Malová (2013) focus on 'swinging' voters. According to their analysis, approximately 43% of voters changed their party preference between the 2010 and 2012 elections. However, as they state, this number is only a lower limit, as it does not include voters who only voted in one of the two analysed elections. Their results also show that the probability that an individual changes their intra-bloc party preference increases with age, education, and locality size. Conversely, younger and less educated voters – if they decide to change their party preference at all – are more likely to vote for a party from another bloc. The study also examines the volatility of ethnic Hungarian voters and suggests that their preferences are four times more stable than the voting preferences of Slovaks (Baboš & Malová, 2013, p. 142). These findings were later echoed by Linek and Gyárfášová (2020), and we re-evaluate them in this study.

Existing work on Slovakia also identifies the remobilization of former non-voters as a consequential determinant of volatility. For example, in the 2016 election, these voters were mobilized by new radical-right parties like ĽSNS and Sme Rodina. These two parties received almost a third of former non-voters' ballots (excluding first-time eligible voters), and thus made it to parliament for the first time (Gyárfášová et al., 2017). In fact, non-participation in previous elections was the strongest predictor of voting for these radical-right newcomers (Gyárfášová et al., 2017). The offer of right-wing extremism – anti-immigrant, anti-establishment, and based on protest appeals – combined with novelty to

remobilize segments of the electorate. As these studies illustrate, Slovakia has generally followed the wider Central European trend: within-system (Type B) volatility has been lower than extra-system (Type A) volatility. Yet, the 2020 election saw some deviations from this pattern. While new parties, like PS (Progressive Slovakia)/SPOLU and Za ľudí, contested the 2020 election, much of the election's volatility was driven by shifts away from governing parties to opposition ones – especially from Smer to OĽaNO. Unsurprisingly, perceptions of corruption were the primary cause of these shifts (cf. Linek and Gyárfášová, 2020, p. 318).

Leading up to the 2020 election, the public had an enormous desire for a decent government that respected the rule of law. As such, the main goal of the four-party, pro-Western coalition that emerged from the 2020 election was to fight corruption and bring the most prominent cases of political corruption from the previous term to justice. Some of these changes did occur. Smer was electorally defeated and removed from power, and many anti-corruption proceedings were pursued successfully. Yet, the government faced external and internal challenges, often failing to meet expectations. Challenges included the Covid-19 pandemic, high inflation, various energy crises, and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting wave of war refugees. Moreover, the government suffered various intra-coalition conflicts and animosities (Freedom House, 2023).

The public perceived the governing of the coalition as continuous chaos. Trust in the government reached historical lows. In early 2023, the public had the lowest level of trust in the government since 1993 – only 14% of the population trusted the government led by Eduard Heger (Standard Eurobarometer 98). By the end of 2022, the government lost a no-confidence vote in parliament, and thus governed in demission. Only a few months later, in May 2023, the government resigned and President Zuzana Čaputová swore in a government of experts to lead the country until the early election. Thus, the early election took place in a very tense atmosphere preceded by over three years of unprecedented political instability. The electoral campaign was also highly personalized, uncivil, and appealed to fear and anger to mobilize potential voters.

Sociocultural issues and foreign policy featured prominently in the election campaign. Nationalist conservatism – rooted in traditional family values, a hierarchical social order, and a 'sovereign Slovak foreign policy' – stood against liberal progressivism – advocating the protection of minority rights and a pro-West, pro-Ukraine Slovakia. The former camp, represented by the newly radicalized Smer and various smaller, radical-right parties, took positions against LGBT+ equality and attempted to mobilize the electorate with anti-migrant appeals and anti-Ukraine rhetoric. The latter camp, most strongly represented by PS, presented a pro-European, pro-West, socioculturally liberal direction for Slovakia.

However, this polarizing line was not only about cultural values; it was also about the basic principles of liberal democracy. In many ways, this was an existential election for Smer. Smer's loss in the 2020 election allowed the new

government to pursue sustained – and successful – anti-corruption efforts. These efforts slowly unravelled the system of corruption and patronage that Smer had built over multiple years in power (Freedom House, 2024). The investigations even reached the party leader, Robert Fico, and some of his closest allies, like the current Defence Minister, Robert Kaliňák. The 2023 election offered Smer the chance to regain control over state institutions, and thus stop the investigations. This motivation – and the emergence of Hlas as a more moderate, social democratic alternative – underpinned Smer's vote-seeking radicalization. This radicalization drew the party to positions reminiscent of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz – not only in terms of foreign policy and LGBT+ rights, but also in terms of the illiberal tendency to limit independent institutions.

As Zsolt Enyedi argues, 'illiberal conservativism is hostile to checks and balances, state neutrality, and the ability of the mass media and civil society to hold decision-makers accountable' (Enyedi, 2023, p. 12). Linked to civilizational ethnocentrism and paternalist populism, illiberal conservativism represents the toxic combination responsible for democratic regress which can be observed in some CEE countries since the 2010s (Enyedi, 2023). An inevitable consequence of this process is the reduction of political competition to a contest between two polarized blocs, one of which represents a regress to authoritarianism, while the other tries to save the rule of law and liberal democracy. These dynamics were already present in the 2023 election campaign. Smer promised voters the protection of a strong social state and stability – guaranteed through the return of the old system. PS offered voters the opposite: the charting of a new liberal, pro-European path, one that would also guarantee the rule of law. These opposing visions are why many considered Slovakia's 2023 election 'critical'; it decided not only the routine alternation of power, but also the future direction of the country.

Turnout in the election reached 68.5%, which was higher than in 2020 (65.8%). Twenty-five political parties contested the election. The winner, Smer, received 22.9% of votes and 42 mandates (a gain of four seats compared to the previous election). This victory continued Smer's long record of success in Slovak politics – the party has now won five elections and has been the formateur of four governments. PS finished second with 18% of the vote and 32 seats. Third place went to Hlas (14% and 27 seats). Hlas split from Smer after the 2020 election and was led into the election by the former electoral leader of Smer and former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini. During the election campaign, Hlas attempted to portray itself as a moderate social democratic alternative to Smer. The winner of the 2020 election, the culturally conservative, anti-corruption, anti-establishment OĽaNO won 8.9% of the vote and 16 seats. KDH, a long-standing conservative force in Slovak politics, returned to the national parliament after a two electoral cycle absence with 6.8% of the vote (12 seats). Likewise, the ethnonationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) celebrated a comeback to national politics with 5.6% of the vote and 10 seats. Finally, the economically rightwing and socioculturally

liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) received 6.3% of the vote and 11 mandates. Three parties – Smer, Hlas, and SNS – quickly formed a government coalition, with Robert Fico, the leader of Smer, serving as Prime Minister. The coalition has a narrow majority of 79 out of 150 seats in the parliament.

It is also worth mentioning the parties that failed to achieve representation. After a breakthrough in 2016, the extreme right-wing, represented by ĽSNS, as well as its splinter party, Republika, failed to achieve parliamentary representation. One possible explanation for this failure is the radicalization of Smer, which may have attracted voters who would have otherwise supported the extreme right. A newly established party, Demokrati, led by the former Prime Minister of the centre-right coalition, Eduard Heger, and several other former ministers, received less than 3% of the vote. Another member of the former coalition, Sme Rodina, had the same fate. The fourth coalition party, Za ľudí, only made it to parliament by joining an electoral coalition with OĽaNO. Thus, the party originally founded by former President Andrej Kiska in 2019 practically disappeared. The fragmented political representation of the Hungarian minority completes the list of unsuccessful parties. No Hungarian party managed to surpass the required threshold of 5%. The most successful Hungarian ethnic minority party, Szövetség-Aliancia – the de facto successor of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (MKO-MKS) – received 4.4% of the vote. These results highlight that the 2023 election broke a longstanding pattern when it comes to Slovak politics: no genuinely new political parties succeeded. Hlas, perhaps the only party that could be considered 'new', had strong personal and organizational continuity with Smer. Demokrati and Republika – which had strong continuity with OĽaNO and ĽSNS, respectively – failed to cross the threshold for representation.

Having outlined the dynamics of the 2023 election and its results, we proceed with the primary aim of our study: evaluating electoral volatility.

5. Research objectives and research design

While we also calculate net or aggregate volatility, we primarily focus our analysis on individual-level volatility. Individual volatility (and loyalty) can be summarized through the following five categories (Ondruška, 2022, p. 283). First, voters can be loyal: they can vote for the same party in consecutive elections. These voters are non-volatile in the sense that they provide stable support for the same party across two elections. Second, voters can abstain from both the election at time *t-1* and from the election at time *t*. These are stable non-voters. The third category comprises newly eligible voters and remobilized voters. New voters cast their ballots for the very first time; remobilized voters did not cast ballots in the previous election but

did cast ballots in the current election. Fourth, former voters voted in the election at *t-1* but abstained in election *t*. The last category is volatile voters – those who participated in both elections, but switched from one party to another.

Due to the nature of exit poll data, which surveys only participating voters, we cannot include the second category, voters who abstained in both elections, or the fourth category, those who voted before but abstained in the current election. Thus, we focus on categories one, three, and five. Specifically, we use aggregate electoral results as well as exit poll data to analyse: (1) trends in individual volatility, operationalized as vote switching between consecutive elections; (2) loyal and mobile voters, both in general and for concrete political parties; (3) intra- and inter-bloc volatility; (4) the vote choice of mobilized former non-voters; and (5) patterns of volatility and mobilization associated with the two strongest parties, Smer and PS.

To measure volatility, we use the sum of the absolute changes in percentages of voter support for each party between two consecutive elections, divided by two (so that gains and losses are not counted twice) (cf. Charvát and Just, 2016, p. 20). We do not consider vote changes due to electoral coalitions (e.g., Za ľudí), party mergers (e.g., Dobrá voľba), or party renaming (e.g., Hlas ľudu) as vote switching. However, parties that emerged through splits (e.g., Hlas, Republika, Demokrati) were coded as different from their predecessors. Thus, if a voter cast their ballot for a predecessor party in 2020 and said predecessor's successor in 2023, this would count as vote switching.

Our analysis is based on data from an exit poll survey conducted on 30 September 2023 by the Focus research agency for TV Markíza. To make comparisons over time, we rely on exit polls from previous elections (Focus Agency, 2012, 2016, 2020). The 2023 exit poll sample is composed of 19,945 voters. Data collection took place in 170 out of approximately 6,000 electoral districts. Focus chose these 170 districts due to their representativeness of the overall electoral results in previous elections. We weigh observations to more closely represent the overall electorate. The exit poll estimates were broadcast by TV Markíza shortly after polling stations closed.

6. Results

6.1 Aggregate and individual volatility in the 2023 election

Aggregate (net) volatility in the 2023 election reached 41%, which was 7% higher than in 2020 and the highest of any Slovak election (Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020, p. 306). The increase is related to several circumstances: (1) the significant departure of voters from the winner of the 2020 election, OĽaNO; (2) the substantive

electoral gain of PS (coded as a continuation of the coalition PS/SPOLU from 2020); and (3) strong voter support for Hlas, a de-facto new party. These large movements, combined with other, smaller inter-election shifts, led to a higher level of aggregate volatility than in 2020. Thus, Slovakia's ninth election since the transition from state socialism saw an increase in instability compared to previous elections.

We calculated individual voter transfers between elections based on data from exit polls (from 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2023). For the sake of comparability, the same procedure was applied. As Table 1 indicates, the share of stable party voters has decreased in every election since 2010. As such, individual (gross) volatility has increased, and in the 2023 election, it exceeded 50% – the highest level in Slovakia's history.

Table 1:
Individual volatility 2010-2023

Volatility Type	Election Pairs (%)			
	2020-2023	*2016-2020*	*2012-2016*	*2010-2012*
Individual volatility	54.0	45.8	38.9	32.9
Stable voters	38.6	44.6	50.7	60.3
Intra-bloc volatility	35.5	29.9	23.2	19.1
Inter-bloc volatility	15.1	12.7	10.6	6.8
Volatile voters (small parties difficult to categorize)	3.4	3.2	5.1	7.0
Non-voters (except for first-time voters)	7.4	9.6	10.5	6.7

Source: exit poll data, Focus for TV Markíza in 2023, 2020, and 2016, and for RTVS in 2012.

Due to the relevance of the two competing blocs in Slovak politics, we also calculated intra- and inter-bloc volatility. In line with earlier studies, we define two blocs: (1) the civic right and (2) the nationalist left-wing (Baboš & Malová, 2013). We present the composition of these blocs for each pair of elections in Table 2. We do note, however, that other dividing lines may also be relevant – e.g., the governing coalition that emerged from the 2016 election was composed of parties from both blocs. Yet, after the 2020 and 2023 elections, the logic of this division was reflected in the creation of both government coalitions.

Table 2:
Structure of blocs between 2010 and 2023

Election Pair	Bloc 1	Bloc 2
2010-2012	KDH, Most-Híd, MKP-SMK, OĽaNO, SaS, SDKÚ-DS, Zmena zdola	ĽS-HZDS, KSS, Smer, SNS
2012-2016	KDH, Most-Híd, MKP-SMK, OĽaNO, SaS, SDKÚ-DS, #Sieť, Sme rodina,	ĽSNS, Smer, SNS
2016-2020	KDH, Most-Híd, MKP-SMK/MKO-MKS, OĽaNO, PS/SPOLU, SaS, Sieť, Sme Rodina, Za ľudí	Dobrá voľba, ĽSNS, Smer, SNS, Vlasť
2020-2023	Aliancia, Demokrati, KDH, OĽaNO, PS/SPOLU, SaS, Sme rodina	ĽSNS, Hlas, Smer, SNS, Republika

Source: Baboš & Malová (2013) and the authors.

Table 3:
Bloc dynamics of volatility 2010-2023

Volatility Type	Election Pairs (%)			
	2020-2023	*2016-2020*	*2012-2016*	*2010-2012*
Intra-bloc volatility – Bloc 1	22.4	23.4	16.8	15.2
Intra-bloc volatility – Bloc 2	13.1	6.5	6.4	3.9
Inter-bloc volatility – to Bloc 1	1.8	9.3	7.0	3.5
Inter-bloc volatility – to Bloc 2	13.3	3.4	3.5	3.3

Source: exit poll data, Focus for TV Markíza in 2023, 2020, and 2016, and for RTVS in 2012.

Table 3 presents intra- and inter-bloc volatility for Slovak elections since 2010. In general, intra-bloc volatility has been larger in magnitude than inter-bloc volatility. This is primarily due to vote switching between the parties of the 'civic right' (Bloc 1). For example, OĽaNO received only 8.6% of votes in 2016, but won 25% of the vote in 2020, having successfully mobilized a significant portion of Bloc 1 voters. A similar example is that of PS, which failed to make it into parliament in 2020, but finished second in 2023. We note, however, that intra-bloc volatility within Bloc 1, while high, was relatively constant in the last two pairs of elections.

Intra-bloc volatility in Bloc 2, the nationalist left-wing, has generally been low. However, in 2023, Bloc 2's intra-bloc volatility increased substantially – in fact, it doubled in size compared to both 2016-2020 and 2012-2016. This increase is due to two developments. First, in 2023, voters moved away from radical-right parties towards Smer. For example, almost 30% of former ĽSNS voters and 20% of former SNS voters voted for Smer in 2023 (see Table 4 below). The radicalization of Smer – primarily on sociocultural and foreign policy issues – during the election campaign seemed to attract voters who had previously cast their ballots for the more radical options in Bloc 2. Furthermore, many former supporters of the

radical right may have been dissuaded from supporting these parties because: (1) some of the most notable personalities in ĽSNS left the party to form Republika, and (2) Republika toned down some of its extremist rhetoric to make the party more acceptable to both a broader electorate and potential coalition partners. Second, 26% of Smer's 2020 electorate cast their ballots for Hlas in 2023. The presence of a 'new', moderate, social democratic alternative to Smer also led to shifts within Bloc 2.

Between 2010 and 2020, low levels of inter-bloc volatility characterized the Slovak party system. Vote switching between the civic right and the nationalist left-wing was rare. However, in 2023, inter-bloc volatility increased, as voters shifted from Bloc 1 to Bloc 2. In other words, former supporters of coalition parties voted for the opposition – likely due to dissatisfaction with the disorder of governance between 2020 and 2023. The largest movements were away from OĽaNO and Sme Rodina towards Hlas and Smer. These movements, from government to opposition, parallel similar – though smaller in magnitude – voter movements in 2020. Prior to that election, anti-corruption sentiment and public frustration with the state of the country drove many voters away from Smer and SNS towards opposition parties. Importantly, very few voters moved from Bloc 2 to Bloc 1 in 2023, suggesting that even PS – not part of the government and the most successful party on the civic right – failed to convince Bloc 2 voters. More generally, these findings indicate that increasing numbers of voters are starting to move between blocs, and that government versus opposition dynamics drive these movements.

6.2 Volatility at the individual level: gains and losses of political parties

We proceed by taking a closer look at individual-level volatility between the 2020 and 2023 elections. First, we consider the extent to which voters remained loyal – i.e., the rate at which voters repeated their choice in the two elections. Second, we evaluate the most popular 'destinations' of voters who were not loyal. Table 4 presents these results. The rows of Table 4 represent the electorate for each party in the 2020 election. The second-to-last row represents voters who cast their ballots for the first time in 2023. The last row represents voters who did not vote in 2020 but had voted previously. Each column in Table 4 signifies a potential 'destination' for each of these 2020 electoral groups; thus, the cells represent the percentage of each electoral group going to one of these 'destinations' in the 2023 election.

2020 Vote Choice	2023 Vote Choice											
	Smer	PS	Hlas	OĽaNO	KDH	SaS	SNS	Republika	Aliancia	Demokrati	Sme Rodina	ĽSNS
Smer	**63**	1	26	1	1	0	4	3	0	0	1	0
PS/SPOLU	2	**81**	4	1	1	6	1	1	0	3	0	0
OĽaNO	8	22	9	**28**	8	6	4	3	1	6	2	0
Za ľudí	2	44	7	6	7	12	2	1	0	12	2	0
KDH	2	5	2	5	**75**	2	3	0	1	3	0	0
SaS	4	34	7	2	2	**41**	2	1	0	4	1	0
SNS	20	1	14	1	2	1	**51**	5	1	1	1	0
MKO-MKS	2	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	**88**	0	0	0
Sme Rodina	21	8	22	5	5	3	8	8	1	2	**15**	0
ĽSNS	29	1	7	1	2	1	12	33	0	1	1	**12**
First-time voters	17	35	10	7	6	6	3	7	3	2	2	1
2020 non-voters	25	12	21	9	4	3	5	8	5	2	3	1

Note: numbers are percentages; the share of loyal voters is marked in bold; source: exit poll data, Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

As in previous years, the most loyal voters were those of ethnic minority and religious parties. Of voters who supported MKO-MKS (the Hungarian ethnic minority party) in 2020, 88% supported Aliancia, the successor party, in 2023. Likewise, 75% of KDH voters remained loyal between 2020 and 2023. The voter base of PS was also highly loyal: 81% of voters who supported the PS/SPOLU coalition in 2020 cast their ballots for PS in 2023. Given the division of Smer, it is worth examining the extent to which voters remained loyal to the party: 26% of 2020 Smer voters switched their vote to Hlas in 2023, while 63% remained loyal. The fact that only around one-fourth of Smer's former 2020 electorate supported Hlas in 2023 suggests that the electorates of the two parties are relatively differentiated. A parallel case – albeit one less consequential in terms of the overall results – is that of ĽSNS and Republika. While the leaders of Republika all reached the highest levels of politics as members of ĽSNS, only about one-third of ĽSNS's 2020 electorate supported Republika in 2023. About 12% of ĽSNS's 2020 electorate remained loyal to the party, while 29% supported Smer. Similarly, Smer also attracted the voters of another radical-right party: 20% of voters who cast their ballots for SNS in 2020 voted for Smer in the 2023 election.

The high level of support for Smer from former radical-right voters seems to confirm that the party's radicalization successfully attracted new voters. At

the same time, the fact that 63% of the party's voters remained loyal shows that this radicalization did not discourage Smer's traditional electorate. A combination of leftism on socio-economic issues – particularly the emphasis on a strong state that takes care of its people – and conservative positions on sociocultural issues proved to be effective for Smer. Moreover, if we consider Hlas and Smer as representatives of social democracy, their split seems to have had a positive effect on the party family's electoral fortunes. The split enabled Smer to get closer to the positions of the radical right on sociocultural and foreign policy issues, while also allowing Hlas to appeal to a more socioculturally liberal, though still left-leaning, electorate.

Importantly, remobilized voters – i.e., those who had voted before, but did not do so in 2020 – also helped Smer succeed in 2023. About one-fourth of these voters decided to cast their ballots for Smer. A similar number (20%) of remobilized voters supported Hlas. These voters were likely demobilized in 2020 by the exposed political corruption and oligarchic connections of Smer, which surfaced after the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová. In 2023, some of these voters returned to the ballot box due to frustration with the government, the radicalization of Smer, and the 'novelty' of Hlas. When it comes to first-time voters, PS was most successful – more than one-third of individuals casting their ballots for the very first time supported the party. PS was also somewhat successful at remobilizing former voters, capturing 12% of their support. In contrast to previous elections, Smer was also able to appeal to first-time voters in 2023. While in 2020 the party's share of first-time voter support was minimal, it reached 17% in 2023.

The centre-right, former government parties – OĽaNO, SaS, Sme Rodina, and Za ľudí – only won 17.4% of the vote (compared to 45.3% in 2020), and thus lost approximately 70% of their parliamentary seats. This massive shift in voter support resulted from unmanaged governance and gradual defections from the original constitutional majority. Due to the unstable economic situation and widespread corruption, 'punishing' the government is often a strong motivator of voter decisions in many post-communist countries (e.g., Gherghina, 2011). The potential for incumbents to be punished was evident and manifested in various attitudinal indicators long before the election. For example, evaluations of the government's performance and levels of trust in political institutions reached historic lows in early 2023 (Standard Eurobarometer 98).

Unsurprisingly, coalition parties largely failed to maintain voter support. Sme Rodina retained 15% of their former voters, but this was not enough to achieve even 3% of the total result. In the case of OĽaNO, which had achieved an extraordinary result in the previous election, only 28% of 2020 voters remained loyal in 2023. Only SaS, which left the government coalition in the summer of 2022, maintained a certain degree of stability: 41% of 2020 voters remained loyal to the party. In general, the exodus from these parties benefited PS. 45% of former Za ľudí voters supported PS, as did 33% of former SaS voters and 22% of former

OĽaNO voters. We also note that 43% of Sme Rodina voters supported Smer (21%) and Hlas (22%), confirming the oppositional nature of this party even within the (former) coalition government.

Table 5 breaks down the electorates of the three most successful parties in 2023 – Smer, PS, and Hlas – compared to 2020. To further clarify, Table 4 (above) shows that 81% of PS's 2020 electorate remained loyal to the party in 2023. In contrast, the first cell of Table 5 shows that this 81% of voters composed only 24% of PS's total 2023 electorate. In other words, 2020 PS voters were largely loyal, but made up only about one-fourth of the party's 2023 electorate. Thus, 76% of PS's 2023 electorate supported other parties or did not vote in 2020, with the largest segments having previously supported OĽaNO and SaS. Likewise, Table 5 shows that 2020 Smer voters comprised 60% of Smer's 2023 electorate, but that the party also successfully attracted voters who cast their ballots for other options or did not vote in 2020. Perhaps most significantly, 40% of Hlas's 2023 electorate were 2020 Smer voters, but the party also mobilized former supporters of OĽaNO, Sme Rodina, and voters who stayed home in 2020.

Table 5:
The 2023 electorates of PS, Smer, and Hlas compared to 2020

2020 Vote Choice	2023 Vote Choice		
	PS	Smer	Hlas
PS/SPOLU	24	0	2
Smer	1	61	40
OĽaNO	29	8	15
Za ľudí	9	0	2
SaS	15	2	4
Sme Rodina	3	6	11
SNS	0	2	3
MKO-MKS	0	0	0
ĽSNS	0	5	2
KDH	1	0	1
Other parties	3	4	9
First-time voters	8	3	3
2020 non-voters	5	8	10

Note: numbers are percentages of a party's total 2023 electorate; source: exit poll data. Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

6.3 Analysing volatility patterns according to the self-declared motives of voters

Next, we focus on identifying the motivations that underpin vote choice. We specifically consider the motives of voters who supported the two most successful parties in 2023: PS and Smer. In the exit poll, respondents could choose one reason from a closed list of motives to explain their choice of party. The list was compiled from appeals used by political parties during the campaign. We are aware of limits resulting from the fact that voters could retroactively rationalize their motive, but this risk accompanies any self-declared answers. Table 6 presents descriptive statistics on these vote-choice motives – specifically their frequency amongst exit poll respondents, and the party supporters for whom a given motive resonated most.

Table 6:
Self-declared motives of vote-choice and their relevance for different party supporters

Declared motive	Frequency amongst voters (%)	Party supporters for whom this reason resonated most (% of party voters choosing this reason)
Is the lesser evil	15	Sme rodina (30%)
Fights corruption	12	OĽaNO (70%)
Has the best leader	12	Hlas (33%)
Will make us like developed countries	11	PS (37%); SaS (30%)
Protects national interests	11	SNS (45%), Republika (30%)
Will bring order	9	Republika (20%)
Protects us from higher prices	6	Smer (40%); Hlas (31%)
Is conservative	5	KDH (36%)
Stands for the EU/NATO	5	Demokrati (21%)
Is liberal	4	PS (16%)
Represents minorities	3	Aliancia (49%)
Will ensure that the state does not go bankrupt	3	SaS (15%)
Worried they will not have enough votes	2	SaS (5%)
Will cooperate with Russia	2	Republika (5%)

Note: closed list with a maximum of one choice; source: exit poll data. Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

The three most popular motives behind individual decisions at the ballot box were 'is the lesser evil', 'fights corruption', and 'has the best leader'. Taken together, the popularity of these motives echoes previous findings on vote choice in Slovakia. First, many individuals are dissatisfied with political parties and tend to choose what they view as the least-worst option. Second, corruption remains a salient motivation (e.g., Haughton et al., 2022). Third, Slovak politics is person-

alized, and voters often make their decisions based on party leader evaluations (Gyárfášová & Hlatky, 2023). A significant portion of voters – particularly those of PS and SaS – are motivated by the parties' visions for Slovakia's future trajectory. Likewise, nationalist appeals motivate the supporters of radical-right parties like SNS and Republika. Voters also explained their decision to support Smer by referencing the party's ability to fight high prices. This suggests that the left-wing economic positions of Smer (and, to a lesser extent, Hlas) continue to motivate voters.

Next, we analyse correlations in the data using regression analysis. Specifically, we consider whether certain motivations are associated with certain patterns of voter behaviour. To do so, we create four different binary dependent variables: (1) loyal versus volatile voters; (2) remobilized versus other voters; (3) remobilized PS voters versus other voters; and (4) remobilized Smer voters versus other voters. From the list of motivations, we create two sets of independent variables. First, we consider the five most popular motivations (see Table 6) versus all others; second, we consider 'ideological' or 'programmatic' motivations versus all others (i.e., all non-ideological and non-programmatic motivations serve as the reference category). Ideological and programmatic motives include protection from higher prices, stands for the EU and NATO, party is conservative, party is liberal, and cooperation with Russia. We include age, gender, education, and nationality as control variables in all regressions. Models for the first two dependent variables are estimated with binary logit. For the remobilized PS and Smer dependent variables, we rely on Firth's penalized logistic regression to account for the small number of positive cases, and thus the imbalanced nature of the data.

Figure 1 presents the regression results for loyal voters (coded as 1; N=5,559) versus volatile voters (coded as 0; N=11,623). All coefficients are presented as odds ratios; as such, values above 1 indicate a positive association with loyalty, while values below 1 indicate a positive association with volatility. The results indicate that several motivations had statistically significant associations with loyalty/volatility. First, voters who indicated that they chose to support a party because it protected national interests, was the lesser evil, or stood for the EU and NATO were more likely to have switched their vote between 2020 and 2023 (as indicated by odds ratios below 1). Voters who stated that their choices were motivated by the party's fight against corruption, its liberal or conservative stance, or its ability to protect against higher prices were more likely to remain loyal than those who cited other reasons.

Figure 1:
Loyal versus volatile voters
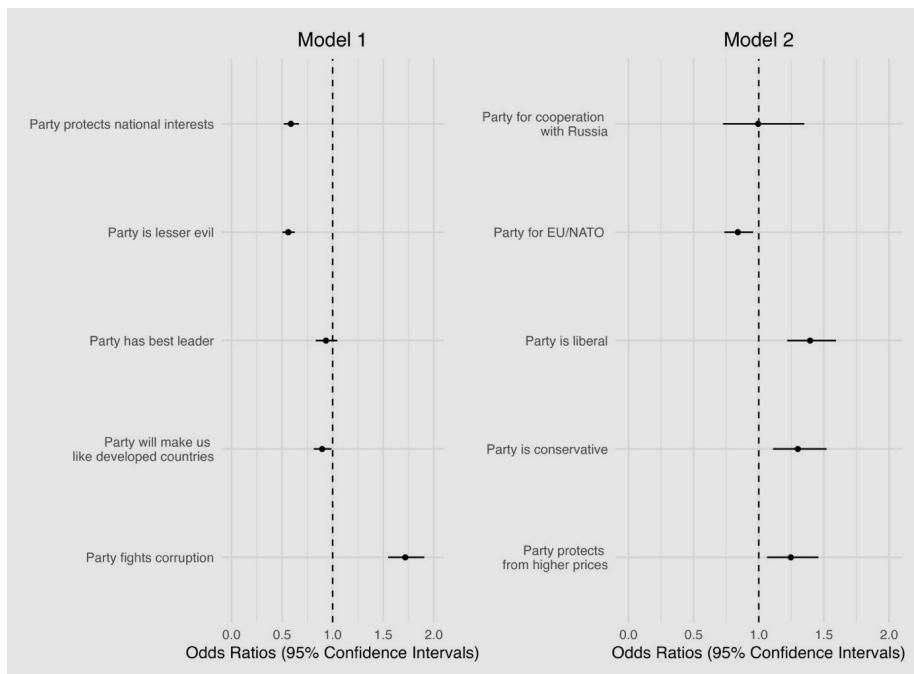
Note: N=17,182; source: exit poll data. Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

These results help us make sense of individual volatility. The negative association between national interests and loyalty likely reflects the transition of former radical right voters to Smer. Likewise, the negative relationship associated with the EU/NATO motivation is potentially a product of the increasing politicization of geopolitics during the campaign, and the subset of voters who chose to support PS because of the party's pro-Western orientation. 'The party is the lesser evil' motivation is associated with volatility as it may have been the primary motivation for many voters dissatisfied with the former governing coalition. Finally, the positive association between fighting corruption and loyalty is likely a product of loyal OĽaNO voters. Similarly, the conservative and liberal motivations potentially reflect the high rates of loyalty amongst KDH, and PS and SaS voters, respectively.

Figure 2 presents the regression results for remobilized voters (first-time eligible voters excluded; N=1,093) versus other voters (N=15,323). The results indicate that the only motivation positively associated with remobilization was the party being the lesser evil. Conversely, motivations related to making Slovakia like other developed countries or to positive stances towards the EU and NATO had a negative association with remobilization. However, this aggregate analysis pools

the remobilized voters of all political parties. This can mask substantial heterogeneity in voter motivations. Therefore, we look at the motivations of remobilized voters who cast their ballots for the two most successful parties: PS (N=219) and Smer (N=217). These results are presented in Figures 3 (PS) and 4 (Smer).

Figure 2:
Remobilized versus other voters
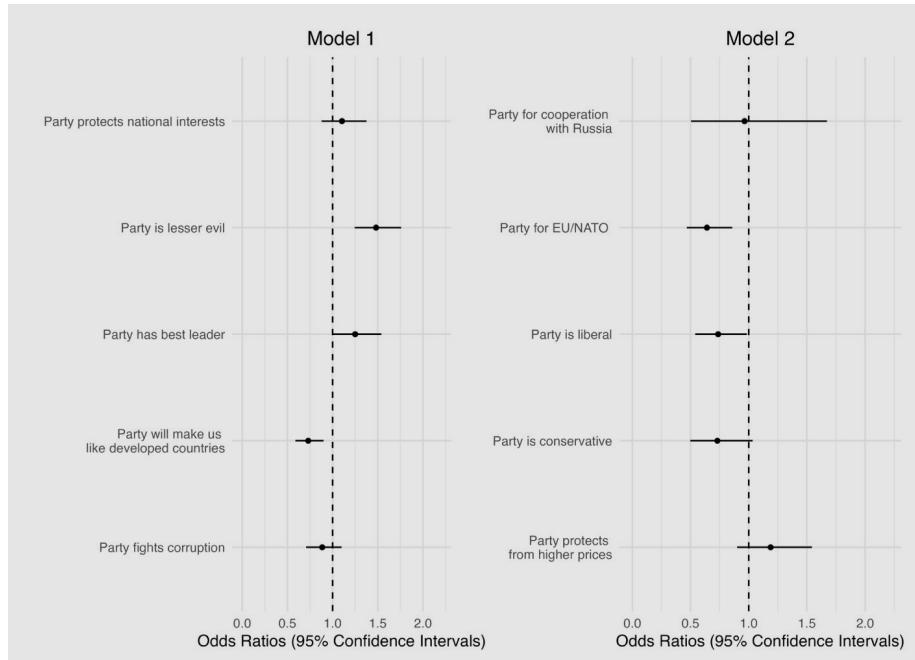
Note: N=16,416; source: exit poll data. Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

As expected, Figures 3 and 4 indicate that the newly mobilized PS and Smer voters had very different motivations for casting their respective ballots. Individuals who did not cast ballots in 2020 but decided to vote for PS in 2023 were motivated by the party's stances on the EU and NATO, the party's liberal ideology, and the party's vision for Slovakia's development. Conversely, motivations related to national interests, party leadership, cooperation with Russia, conservative ideology, and the fight against higher prices had a negative association with being a remobilized PS voter. In sum, PS attracted voters on the liberal side of the geopolitical and sociocultural cleavage in Slovakia.

Newly mobilized Smer voters had different motivations. Protecting national interests, being the lesser evil, having the best leader, and the ability to protect against higher prices were all positively associated with being a remobilized Smer voter. Of these four motivations, positive evaluations of Robert Fico's leadership

had the largest substantive association. Importantly, these results also indicate that motivations related to Russia did not have a substantive (or statistical) association with being a remobilized Smer voter. However, it is important to note that motivations related to stances on the EU/NATO, as well as motivations related to both liberal and conservative ideology, were negatively associated with being a remobilized Smer voter. Thus, it appears that those who stayed home in 2020 but supported Smer in 2023 were not motivated by Smer's ideological radicalization – apart from the diffuse 'protect national interests' motivation. In fact, these results show that voters with ideological motivations – whether conservative or liberal – were *less likely* to be remobilized Smer voters.

Figure 3:
Remobilized PS voters versus other voters
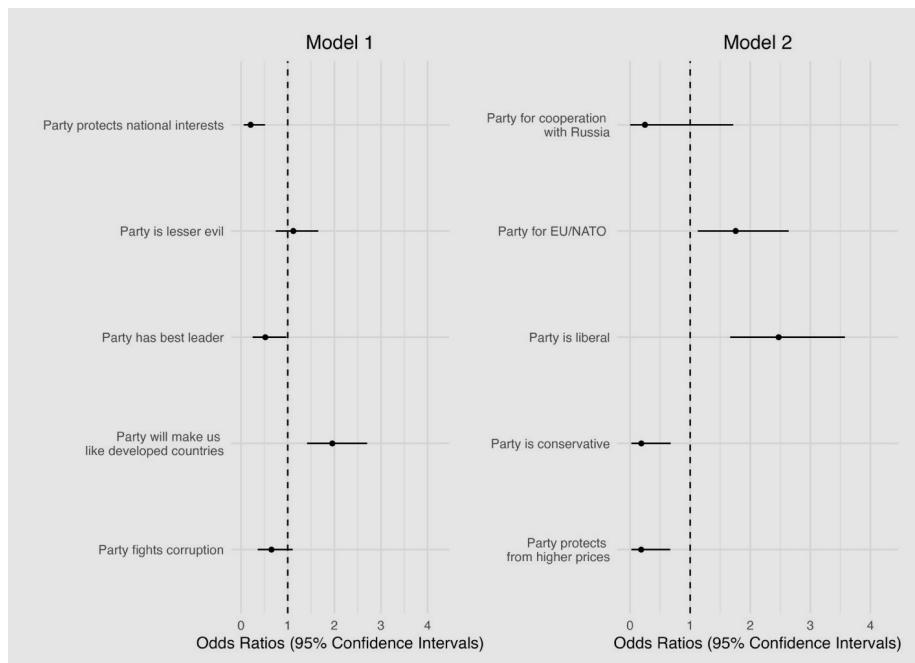
Note: N=16,416; source: exit poll data. Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

Figure 4:
Remobilized Smer voters versus other voters
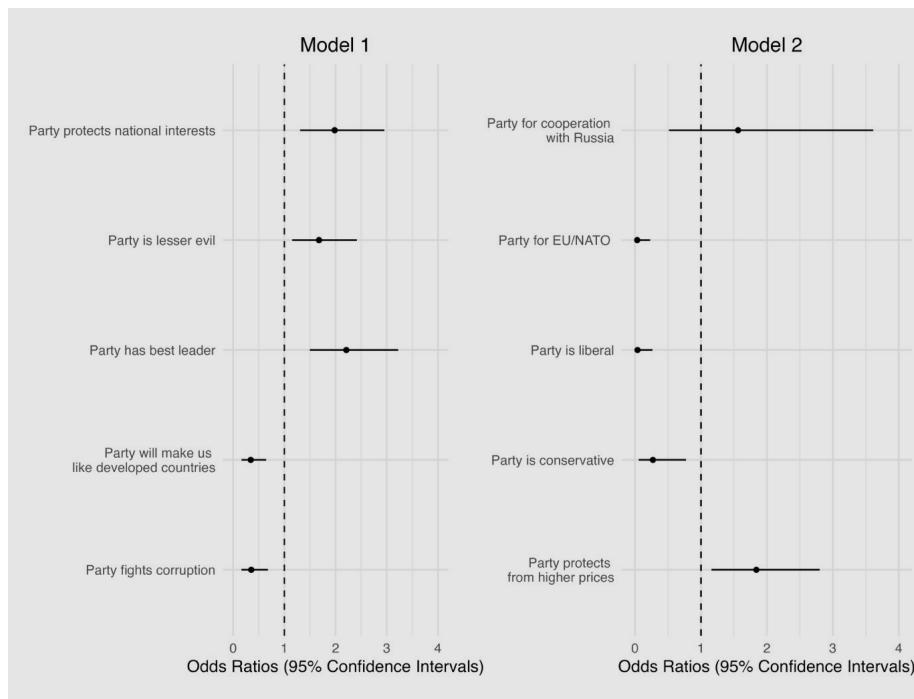
Note: N=16,416; source: exit poll data. Focus for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.

7   Conclusion

The 2023 early election was held in a very tense political and social atmosphere. The government coalition faced a vote of no confidence in late 2022; by May 2023, it had resigned and been replaced by an expert government. Widespread public dissatisfaction and frustration created favourable conditions for opposition parties. Consequently, Smer won the election and formed a coalition with its splinter party Hlas and the nationalist SNS. Robert Fico became prime minister for the fourth time.

Using electoral statistics and exit poll data, this study examined voting behaviour during the 2023 election and focused specifically on volatility. Our findings showed that aggregate as well as individual volatility increased between the 2020 and 2023 elections, and that the overall share of loyal voters decreased (apart from the ethnic and religious vote, as in previous elections). The increase in volatility happened even if we do not consider Hlas and Republika to be new parties due to their personal and ideological continuity with their parent parties, Smer and ĽSNS, respectively.

Intra-bloc volatility continued to be high, especially in the civic-right bloc of Slovak politics. And, compared to all elections since 2010, intra-bloc volatility also increased substantially within the nationalist left-wing bloc. We suggest this latter development was likely driven by Smer's radicalization on sociocultural and foreign policy issues, which attracted former voters of the radical right. When it comes to inter-bloc volatility, our results showed that voters are also increasingly willing to switch between the civic right and the nationalist left-wing in response to poor government performance. In fact, the movement of voters from the civic right to the nationalist left-wing – largely in response to the inefficiency and mismanagement of the OĽaNO-led governments – resulted in the highest level of inter-bloc volatility since 2010. A similar, though less drastic, pattern occurred in 2020 when voters, disappointed by political corruption and scandals, flocked to opposition parties. Given that coalition formation largely follows the structure of the two blocs, punishment of incumbents seems to be the primary factor underpinning inter-bloc volatility.

Our analyses also aimed to better understand the motivations underpinning voter volatility and remobilization. In general, we found that ideological and programmatic motivations – e.g., liberal or conservative ideology, or the fight against high prices – were substantively associated with voter loyalty. Conversely, voters who explained their vote by stating that their chosen party represented the 'lesser evil' were more likely to switch their votes. These discrepancies suggest that a portion of the Slovak electorate has strong ideological and programmatic ties with specific political parties, facilitating consistent choices between elections. For example, KDH voters remained loyal between 2020 and 2023 due to the party's consistent ideological position. However, another portion of the electorate does not have strong ties to political parties – likely due to general dissatisfaction – and is thus more volatile. The 'lesser evil' motivation was the most frequently chosen option amongst exit poll respondents. This suggests that the size of the dissatisfied, 'floating' voter group exceeds the size of the ideologically or programmatically motivated portion of the electorate. More broadly, we see this as evidence that volatility could increase in subsequent elections.

Our results also showed that PS and Smer successfully remobilized voters who had stayed home in 2020. Unsurprisingly, PS appealed to voters with liberal ideological convictions – i.e., those motivated by either the party's vision for Slovakia's future development or positive orientation towards the EU and NATO. Smer's remobilized voters were motivated by party leader Robert Fico, their beliefs about Smer's ability to protect both national interests and voters from higher prices, and their assessment of Smer as the 'lesser evil.' Thus, it seems that Smer's remobilized voters were not necessarily motivated by the party's radicalization on sociocultural and foreign policy issues. And, in fact, voters who noted ideological motivations for their choices – whether conservative or liberal – were less likely to be remobilized Smer voters. In contrast to these remobilized voters, Smer's

radicalization did spur former radical-right voters to switch their support to Smer. Thus, in a time of crisis and instability, Smer was able to effectively appeal to radical-right voters, while also successfully addressing the more diffuse feelings of uncertainty and frustration amongst portions of the electorate.

More generally, the 2023 election confirmed that volatility – of all types – is at an all-time high. From the perspective of previous research, the pattern of rising volatility is perplexing. The increases are not necessarily being driven by the emergence of new parties, nor has the length of Slovak democracy seem to have lowered volatility. As in other Central European countries, political competition in Slovakia remains clearly polarized. And while political parties present competing ideological visions to the Slovak electorate – e.g., about Slovakia's geopolitical orientation, the rights of gender and sexual minorities or, most substantively, about the rule of law and democracy – these competing visions have not necessarily translated into loyal camps of partisan voters. We suggest two primary causes: ineffective governance and a lack of party institutionalization. First, voters punish the poor performance of incumbents, as evidenced by the spectacular collapse of OĽaNO. Since voters do not have loyal partisan commitments, punishment comes easy, and the cycle of volatility continues. Second, Slovak parties reposition themselves not only ideologically – e.g., Smer's radicalization – but also organizationally – e.g., the multiple splits that occurred prior to the 2023 election. These shifts attract new voters, but they also discourage former voters. This was certainly the case for Smer, which lost a significant portion of its electorate to Hlas but gained voters from the radical right. Given these dynamics, a loyal voting base is difficult to maintain. We leave a closer examination of these causes to future research.

The aftermath of the election and the steps undertaken by the Smer-led government to threaten the rule of law have only increased polarization between Slovakia's conflicting blocs. Parties that seemed like they could stake out a middle ground – like Hlas and Sme Rodina – have either adapted to the positions and policies of Smer or have lost their political relevance. It remains to be seen what the future effects of polarization will be and whether depolarization is possible.

List of Abbreviations:

Hlas	Voice-Social Democracy (Hlas-SD)
HZDS	Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
KDH	Christian Democratic Movement
KSS	Communist Party of Slovakia
ĽSNS	People's Party – Our Slovakia
MKP-SMK	Party of Hungarian Community
OĽaNO	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities
PS	Progressive Slovakia
PS/SPOLU	Progressive Slovakia/Together
SaS	Freedom and Solidarity
SDKÚ-DS	Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party
#Sieť	#Network
Smer	Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD)
SMK	Party of Hungarian Coalition
SNS	Slovak National Party
Szövetség-Aliancia	Alliance
Zmena zdola	Change from Below

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New Breakaway Parties in Slovakia: Exploring Intra-party Democracy Shifts[1]

Tomáš Cirhan, Michal Malý[2]

Abstract

Many new parties are electorally succeeding across European party systems, including in post-communist countries. This is especially true in Slovakia, where it is accompanied by another very specific phenomenon, which in our perspective defines recent parliamentary elections – the prevalence of new breakaway parties. These newly formed parties created by splitting from parliamentary parties are now competing alongside them in early parliamentary elections. The 2020-2023 period, in addition to seeing the fall of governments, and a general political crisis and instability, was also characterized by frequent party factionalism. During this period, turbulent development within SMER-SD, ĽSNS and OĽaNO translated into the formation of three new parties – HLAS-SD, Republika, and the Democrats, which represent our case studies. The aim of our paper is to analyse how these new breakaway parties differ from their original parties organizationally, in the processes associated with intra-party democracy (IPD). We empirically explore their leadership selection, candidate selection and membership policies. The existing data (based on the Populism and Political Parties Database) indicate that their three parent parties are highly personalized with low IPD. The findings of our comparative analysis reveal that the new breakaway parties have incorporated more transparent approaches to intraparty processes compared to their parent parties. However, concerning candidate selection, they have not embraced greater inclusiveness than the parties they originated from. Overall, despite a noticeable trend towards intra-party depersonalization, the opportunity for a broader membership base to participate in the decision-making process remains largely unrealized.

Keywords: intra-party democracy; breakaway parties; party origin; party organization; personalization of politics; candidate selection

2   Tomáš Cirhan, Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, tomas.cirhan@fsv.cuni.cz, U Kříže 661/8, 158 00, Praha 5, Czech Republic, ORCID: 0000-0002-5612-3160. Michal Malý, Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, michal.maly@fsv.cuni.cz, U Kříže 661/8, 158 00, Praha 5, Czech Republic, ORCID: 0000-0002-4782-2672.

1. Introduction

New parties make electoral breakthroughs and even participate in government in many European countries, especially in central-eastern Europe (CEE). Although these newcomers naturally gain the interest of the media and the public, relatively little attention is devoted to how they function internally and, more specifically, to their level of intra-party democracy (IPD). Many such new parties are established by splitting away from established parties that have existed within the party system for a while, so-called breakaway parties. Considering the prevalence of highly personalized charismatic leadership in new parties, these non-compromising individuals likely not only stand behind their party's breakaway, but the experience of breaking away also strongly affects IPD within the new parties. Based on existing political theory, we expect that the new breakaway parties do not repeat the same approach towards party organization that was practised in the parent party, in order to avoid the same fate of further factionalism. The individuals who establish break-away parties will likely design the institutional structures of their new parties in reaction to what they perceived as weaknesses within the organization of their parent parties. Based on such experience, it can be expected that the newly formed parties will not replicate the practices that led to party splits in the past. This article thus contributes to the party politics literature by examining the internal structures of such new parties.

The contemporary academic debate concerning IPD encompasses several areas and indicators of this process. In this paper, we empirically pay attention to some processes associated with IPD, a concept we map by looking at leader selection, candidate selection and the position of the party leader of these breakaway parties. Some research regarding the concept of IPD (von dem Berge and Obert, 2018), as well as the process of leader and candidate selection, already exists in the CEE context (Kopeček & Hloušek, 2018; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2019; Kubát & Hartliński, 2020). A large part of the theory that deals with IPD overlaps with that on political personalization, a complex process in which the importance of the institution (like a political party) declines while that of individuals (like party leaders) increases (Rahat & Kenig, 2018, p. 1; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). Measured in three dimensions – media, institutional and behavioural – increasing personalization is said to have a direct relationship with decreasing IPD (Gunther, 2001; Scarrow, 2005). Ignazi (2020) explains this link by stating that rising personalization, evidenced for example by more and more decision-making powers concentrated within the centralised party leadership structures, logically goes hand in hand with a diminished role for the rest of the party organization. Notably, others have looked into intraparty processes from the perspective of the theory of institutionalization and its impact on parties' electoral outcomes (see Rybář & Spáč, 2020).

Our paper explores these theoretical relationships between different party organizational features and IPD using a set of three case studies of new breakaway

parties that competed in the recent general elections in Slovakia. Prior to the 2023 general elections, Slovakia witnessed some of the most chaotic and fragmented eras of governing – even within the context of post-communist countries of CEE, where the bar is already set relatively low. Such instability at the level of national governance, in our view, has its origins in the country's party system itself, and is evident even at the level of individual parties plagued by factionalism. This phenomenon of factionalism is embodied by the trend of new party formation, when over time groups of MPs broke away from three existing parliamentary parties, founding new parties. Specifically, in June 2020, eleven MPs led by former PM Pellegrini broke away from SMER-SD, establishing a new party called HLAS-SD. In March 2021, following a problematic change in the party statutes of the far right ĽSNS, five of its MPs, and one MEP, Milan Uhrik, founded the Republika party. And finally, the collapse of Eduard Heger's government in 2023 led to yet another split in OĽaNO, when Heger with eleven other MPs from took over the Blue Coalition party, renaming it the Democrats, establishing another new party. As such, three new breakaway parties were created in the parliament, without their parent parties disappearing.

As such, not only have most Slovak parties been divided by these frequent splits, but these new factions successfully turn into newly formed parties (i.e. breakaway parties) running alongside their original parties (i.e. parent parties) in elections. The prevalence of these new breakaway parties in the Slovak party system in our view defines not only the recent parliamentary elections, but the overall state of political development in the country. To that end, our paper explores how these new breakaway parties differ from their original parties in regard to their party organization, analysing which aspects may have been adopted.

Notably, the parties considered in our analysis can be perceived from many angles. For instance, some can be viewed as far-right, populist or anti-establishment (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Jankowski et al., 2022). According to some scholars, organizationally, the closest definition for them would be entrepreneurial parties, as they are closely related to their party leader, the so-called political entrepreneur who establishes the new party independently of other existing groups or institutions (see Paolucci, 2006; Hloušek, Kopeček, & Vodová, 2020). As opposed to such entrepreneurial newcomers, the existing theory that deals with new party formation also distinguishes other types of new parties – so-called rooted parties. They differ from entrepreneurial parties by being 'supported by already existing organisations or groups, which promote the new formation and contribute resources to build a party infrastructure' (Bolleyer, 2013, p. 777). Other scholars may also categorize some of our parties under the more dynamic category of so-called challenger parties, solely on the basis of their office-holding experience, since such parties   did 'not have the opportunity to control policy or government' per their definition (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020, p. 21).

Independently of this conceptual discussion, all our concerned parties share certain ideological as well as rhetorical approaches. Specifically, the populist anti-establishment and anti-corruption rhetoric present among some of our cases reflects changes that took place in Slovak politics in the past. Strong feelings of protest have resonated among large segments of Slovak society for some time. Low trust in parties, and in politics in general, corruption scandals of major parties and other challenges are behind the overall political change that our selected parties represent. Our theoretical discussion will illustrate how the demand for strong charismatic politicians (who try to utilize the growing frustration of the electorate) fuels the personalization of parties and diminishes their IPD. Vis-à-vis the theory of IPD, we explore how the new breakaway parties differ from their parent parties regarding party organization, concretely in the selection of leaders and candidates and in the role of party leaders. Our research objective is to identify which of these party organizational features were adopted from the parent parties, and how this affects the IPD of the breakaway parties. We expect that the breakaway parties will likely organise differently, adopting a more inclusive party organisational model, motivated by the desire to avoid the highly personalised and strictly top-down hierarchical modus operandi used in their parent parties, where the party leadership, or the party leader himself, makes the vast majority of decisions. To that end, our analysis deals chiefly with the following research question:

RQ: What are the party organisational features and IPD of new breakaway parties in comparison with their parent parties?

Regarding our research question, we firstly expect that the party organizational setup of our breakaway parties will follow that of their parent parties (reflecting in the level of personalization and IPD). Regarding candidate selection, we predict that the leader selection etc. of the new breakaway parties will be highly similar to the parties they split from.

Secondly, we expect the party leaders of breakaway parties to maintain control over the leader selection process as a safeguard of their position. Our last expectation is that the decision-making power of the party leaders over the party structures of our breakaway parties will be significant.

Regarding the structure of this paper, the theoretical section below will incorporate the conceptual debate regarding breakaway parties, followed by a discussion concerning political personalization and IPD. The next part of the article deals with the case selection, followed by a discussion related to the backgrounds of these cases. The methodological section explains how the empirical analysis is operationalized, and what kind of data it relies on, followed by the empirical section where the actual analysis takes place. Finally, the conclusions section summarizes our findings and comments on their relevance in light of the existing theory that was reviewed at the beginning of the article.

2. Theoretical discussion: breakaway parties, personalization and IPD

> Parties, especially newly formed and newly governing parties, are as far from being unitary actors as any organization can be considering the different pressures they face, such as the need to hold the party together, to communicate and coordinate between the central party organization and the party in public office, and to manage internal conflicts and relations within the organization as well as with coalition partners (Deschouwer, 2008, p. 7).

To begin our theoretical discussion, it is first vital to define the concept of breakaway parties within the universe of new parties. A vast body of theory concerning new party formation exists, both globally (see Rochon, 1985; Lucardie, 2000; Hartleb, 2012) as well as within the CEE context (Sikk, 2005; Bennich-Björkman, 2006; Hanley, 2012). There are many types of newly formed parties that differ in regard to their raison d'être and circumstances under which they emerged. There are multiple vantage points from which the emergence of new political parties can be examined, including institutionalization (Bolleyer, 2013), electoral success, responses to corruption (Engler, 2015), and their overall success and decline (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020). This article aims to contribute to the literature by examining the intra-party structure of new parties.

Generally, three ways in which new parties can be formed are known – firstly, as first-time electoral contenders that have no organizational or personnel links with established parties. Secondly, as persistent minor parties that previously contested elections, but never broke through independently (Hanley, 2012). Thirdly, new parties can come into existence as breakaway parties, defined as new parties that form either by splitting from established parties or by elites breaking away from such parties (Hanley, 2012). Our research focuses chiefly on the breakaway parties. Such parties have a unique place in political science theory, as their formation is closely connected to the question of the organizational stability of parties, and in turn to party factionalism (see Spirova, 2007; Bos & Van Der Brug, 2010).

Parties by nature function as collective entities, within which divided views and opinions have the potential to create internal pressures. Such pressures can eventually 'trigger the formation of factions that render the unitary actors' (Boucek, 2009, pp. 455–456). Such factions, when not muted in the party structure, can potentially strive for, and even succeed, in splitting the party. By the end of this process, the party dissenters may establish a new party, i.e. a breakaway party. Factionalism as a process does not occur in vacuum; certain conditions, such as scandals and pressures associated with participating in government, for instance, can trigger it. For parties trying to avoid or minimize the chances of such developments, party cohesion is something to strive for (see Cirhan, 2023).

Such risks are even more relevant to newly formed and especially newly governing parties. We focus on the concrete breakaway moments in our case studies below.

As we discuss in the next section, we selected our cases based on the level of personalization in their parent parties, with the assumption that it will have an impact on their party organizational structures, and in turn affect their IPD. The term political personalization relates to the on-going theoretical discussion concerning the importance of political institutions, like parties, versus that of individual actors, like their leaders. Personalization takes place when these individual political actors become more prominent at the expense of their institutions (parties) (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). As a process, it is associated with the development of the media, especially with televised political debates and the spread of online communication, enabling an easier and more direct relationship between voter and politician (McAllister, 2007).

The conceptualization of the term personalization involves three layers: behavioural, institutional, and media (see Balmas et al., 2014; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). For the purposes of our analysis, we are interested solely in institutional personalization, a process in which the internal party rules are amended in such a way as to favour the decision-making power of the party leader at the expense of the rest of the party, a so-called centralized personalization (Balmas et al., 2014), sometimes also referred to as the presidentialization of politics (Hloušek, 2015; Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

The above arguments in this theory overlap with, or better, stand opposite to IPD. In a nutshell, institutionally personalized parties, dominated by influential individuals, tend to have lower levels of IPD.

The three parent parties in our study, SMER-SD, ĽSNS, OĽANO, are amongst the most highly personalized parties in Slovakia. For this reason, we explore whether or not our three breakaway parties developed organizationally along similar lines and thus have limited IPD.

With the decline of mass parties, caused in part by a general lack of interest in membership (Van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014), some new parties attempted to attract new supporters by making the internal decision-making process more inclusive, even for those not holding membership status (Ignazi, 1996, 2020). Many scholars expected this trend of fuelling IPD by promoting the rights of members regarding selecting party leaders and candidates would be part of the new development (Scarrow, 2015).

But things developed differently. The growing personalization increased the gap between rank-and-file members and party leaders (Ignazi, 2020). To map this development, Poguntke et al. (2016) came up with a methodological scheme to measure and compare the IPD of different parties, comprising three categories: structures, resources, and representative strategies. We follow this method in our empirical analysis, looking at party structures using a set of three indicators – leader selection, candidate selection, and the role of party leaders in parties.

Selecting leaders is without doubt one of the most important and challenging steps for a party. In regard to IPD, it is crucial who can participate in this process of leader selection (Cross & Blais, 2012), whether all grass-roots members, or a closed group of selected party elites. The inclusiveness of the candidate selection process is an equally important indicator of IPD, which is why this process is subject to many studies (see Hopkin, 2001; Katz, 2001; Barnea & Rahat, 2007; Rahat, 2009; Hazan & Rahat, 2010). Finally, the autonomy and overall position of territorial party branches is an important part of IPD. The absence or diminished role of these units often indicates a centralized organization where the leader holds all the power (Gunther & Diamond, 2003).

Our study probes the impact of Slovakia's fragmented party system – characterized by the existence of several factionalized (parent) and newly formed (breakaway) parties – on party organizational structures, and in turn their IPD. IPD in theory primarily concerns power distribution within parties, encompassing the location of power, its holders, and member participation (Cross & Katz, 2013). These trends and relationships can be assessed by looking at different factors like the candidate selection process (Barnea & Rahat, 2007; Hazat & Rahat, 2010; Katz, 2001; Rahat, 2009), the leader selection process (Aylott & Bolin, 2016; Cross & Blais, 2012), and the various organizational aspects of the party, such as the autonomy of grass-roots networks or territorial party structures (Poguntke et al., 2016). The theoretical debate focuses largely on different indicators of IPD, but does not tell us much about the relationship between parent and breakaway parties in regard to IPD. We attempt to supplement the existing body of theory by looking into this relationship. In particular, we aim to understand the organizational differences between breakaway parties and their parent parties, focusing on the dimensions of IPD. Thus, our analysis of the three Slovakian breakaway parties' organizational structures maps their IPD by looking at these indicators – leader selection, candidate selection and the role of party leaders concerning party membership, territorial party structures and other key party organizational features. The breakaway parties are HLAS-SD, Republika, and the Democrats, which split from SMER-SD, ĽSNS and OĽaNO, respectively. We explain the reasons for the selection of these cases in the next part.

3. Case selection

We have selected three cases of breakaway parties for our analysis, HLAS-SD, Republika, and the Democrats. Our case selection is based on the similar levels of personalization within their three parent parties – SMER-SD, ĽSNS and OĽaNO, according to the Populism and Political Parties Database. The available data from the Populism and Political Parties Database (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021) indicate that

these three parent parties are highly personalized with low IPD (see Figure 1 for details). Indeed, scholars have noted the dominance of party leaders within the party structures of SMER-SD and OĽaNO (Rybář & Spáč, 2020). To illustrate the levels of personalization amongst these parent parties, two examples of highly personalized parties, Forza Italia (FI) from Italy and PVV (the Party for Freedom), are included in Figure 1.

SMER-SD, ĽSNS, OĽANO are characterized by high institutional personalization and low IPD. Although these three parent parties are of course not identical when it comes to organizational matters, in all of them the vast majority of formal power is vested in the party leader. The selection of these three specific parent parties that are highly personalized puts us in a position to analyse how the breakaway parties that split from them approach party organization in a comparative perspective.

The strong position of party leaders (in regard to other party structures) seems to be co-facilitated by the legal setup of the Slovak electoral system and legislation on political parties. Concretely, the system has a single national district for parliamentary elections, meaning each electoral list may not geographically cover all the regions of the country. This system favours parties founded on a single individual (see Haydanka, 2021). Similarly, the legal conditions for political parties are not particularly stringent. The law requires some organizational prerequisites for establishing a political party, such as the existence of supreme, executive, arbitration, and audit bodies. Each party body, apart from the statutory body, must have at least three members, the executive body must have at least nine members, and the supreme body of the party must have at least 27 members. Additionally, for participation in parliamentary elections, a party must have either 45 members in the supreme body or a total of 300 members (Zbierka zákonov Slovenskej Republiky, 2005). Such a legal framework indeed seems to influence how parties in Slovakia organized, supporting the establishment of highly personalized parties with dominant party leadership. The relative lenience of the rules concerning political parties is visible for instance in the development of OĽANO, which comprised only four party members (Cirhan, 2023).

Personalization and IPD of parent parties
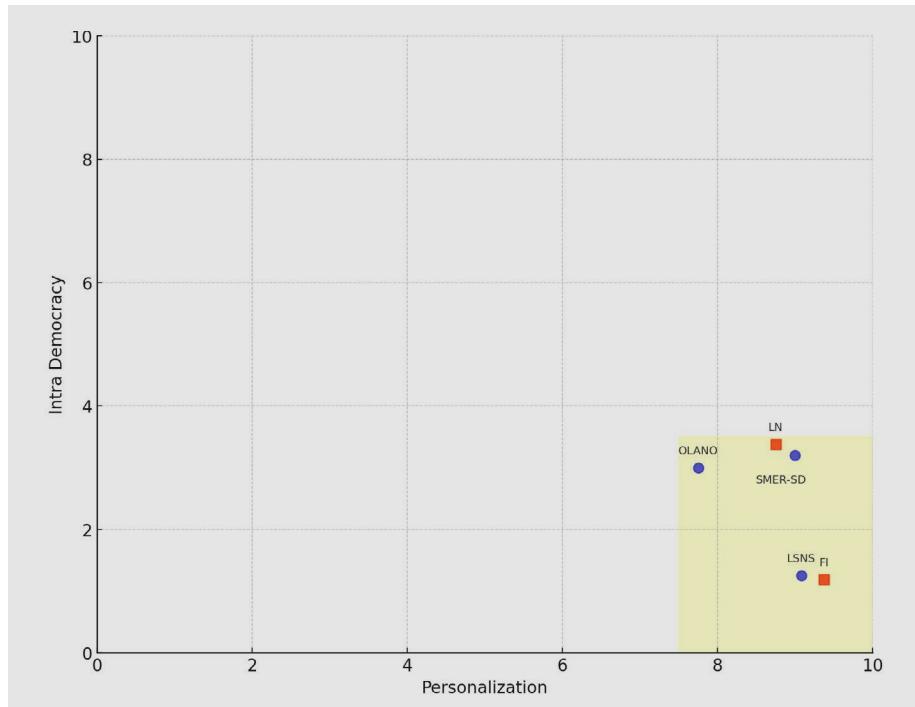
Source: Authors' elaboration based on POPPA dataset.

3.1 Background of the selected cases

This section deals with the backgrounds of the three breakaway parties with a particular focus on how they split from their parent parties and what preceded such events. The cases are described in chronological order according to when the splits took place.

4. New - born party in the midst of government crisis

SMER-SD has been present in the Slovak political space since 1999, and since 2002 it has been a part of the Slovak parliament. Robert Fico has been leading the party since its inception. Due to the low consolidation of the Slovak political system, SMER-SD is considered one of the most organizationally and electorally

stable parties. Similarly, the party has been stable in terms of governance, always holding the position of the Prime Minister. SMER-SD formed a government for the first time after the 2006 elections, marking the first government led by Robert Fico. Then, with a two-year break, SMER-SD returned to power from 2012 to 2016, where it was able to form a government independently. The SMER-SD government continued from 2016 to 2020, albeit with significant complications (Marušiak, 2021). On 15 March 2018, the party chairman and Prime Minister Robert Fico resigned, ending his third government. The trigger for this downfall was the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée (Hájek, 2018). Kuciak's investigation had uncovered corruption at the highest levels of the Slovak political and justice systems, particularly within the governing SMER-SD. He revealed connections between high-ranking politicians and Italian mafia networks, leading to the largest protests in Slovakia since the Velvet Revolution (Harris, 2019).   Although the opposition demanded early elections, SMER-SD proposed a government restoration. The popular Minister of Investments and Informatics, Peter Pellegrini, became the new prime minister. The power structure within SMER-SD resembled that of Poland's PiS, where the party was led by Jaroslav Kaczyński, but the prime minister was Mateusz Morawiecki (Kern, 2018). Additionally, Pellegrini became the leader of SMER-SD for the 2020 elections, campaigning under the slogan 'responsible change'. It was the first time that Robert Fico was not the leader. However, this change did not prevent SMER-SD from suffering a defeat at the hands of Igor Matovič and the OĽANO movement (Havlík et al., 2020). Following the electoral defeat, Peter Pellegrini urged Robert Fico to step down from the presidency and leave the party:

> If Mr. Chairman Fico wants to help SMER-SD, social democracy in Slovakia, the time has come for him to step down from the helm of the party. It will help SMER-SD become stronger, significantly increase its coalition potential, and create space for a new generation of politicians ready to fight (Echo24.cz, 2020).

Fico offered Pellegrini the chairmanship but was unwilling to leave the party. As Pellegrini's conditions were not met, he announced his departure from SMER-SD and the founding of a new political party. Along with Pellegrini, 10 MPs left SMER-SD. On 11 September, the party HLAS-SD was officially formed, with Pellegrini as its chairman (Krkoška, 2020).

5. Criminal conviction as a trigger of new party formation

The People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) was established in February 2010. The party didn't follow the conventional path of formation but emerged through the rebranding of the Wine Friends Party, which Marian Kotleba and a few friends took control of. Shortly after assuming leadership of the party, they changed its name to the People's Party of Social Solidarity, and after a few months, the party was renamed ĽSNS (Mesežnikov & Gyarfášová, 2016). Kotleba's involvement with the Wine Friends Party followed the dissolution of his previous Slovak Togetherness party. This party openly embraced the legacy of the World War Two-era fascist Slovak State, evident in actions such as wearing Hlinka Guard uniforms and condemning the Slovak National Uprising (Jancura, 2016). The party's activities were deemed unconstitutional, leading to its dissolution by the Supreme Court in 2006, after operating for about a year (Pravda, 2006). Consequently, within the ĽSNS leadership, Kotleba had to adopt a different rhetoric that didn't openly challenge parliamentary democracy or violate the constitution (Drábik, 2023). Despite toning down its rhetoric, the party remained quite radical, particularly in its anti-Roma appeals (Kluknavská, 2013).

ĽSNS's first significant electoral success was Marian Kotleba's victory in regional elections, specifically in the Banská Bystrica region. In 2016, the ĽSNS party entered the Slovak parliament for the first time with an 8.04% share. The party maintained its parliamentary position in the 2020 elections with a 7.97% share. At the start of 2021, Kotleba amended the ĽSNS statutes without consulting the rest of the leadership. Kotleba's motive was to solidify the chairman's position and retain control of the party even from prison, as he was sentenced to four years for promoting Nazism. In response to the statute changes, numerous significant ĽSNS politicians departed from the party, led by MEP Milan Uhrík and MP Milan Mazurek. Former ĽSNS politicians were offered the already existing HLAS LUDU party by former MP Peter Marček in order to bypass the requirement of gathering 10,000 votes to establish a new party, which was challenging during the COVID-19 period. The party was subsequently renamed Republika, with MEP Milan Uhrík assuming the chairmanship (Kyseľ, 2021).

6. A broader coalition attempt gone wrong

The Ordinary People and Independent Personalities party (OĽaNO) emerged in 2011 under the leadership of media sector businessman Igor Matovič. His ownership of regionPRESS, overseeing 36 newspapers across Slovakia, significantly

aided OĽaNO in gaining public visibility (Žúborová, 2015, p. 104). Matovič frequently utilized his media outlets to disseminate political messages (Malová and Dolný, 2016). His foray into politics commenced with a civic initiative focused on combating corruption and clientelism (Rolko, 2013, p. 27). OĽaNO's genesis took root when four of its members were elected from the candidate lists of the SAS party. The reception of preferential votes bolstered their resolve to establish an independent party. However, the early 2012 elections resulted in only modest success, with just over an 8% vote share. Despite this, the party managed to maintain its parliamentary presence in 2016, securing 8.8% of the vote. The pivotal shift for OĽaNO took place in the 2020 elections. The scandal surrounding journalist Kuciak's murder, which implicated the ruling Smer party, led to a seismic shift in the electorate (Havlík et al., 2020). OĽaNO capitalized on this wave of public dissatisfaction and swept the 2020 elections. Matovič orchestrated a broad coalition comprising three parties (SAS[3], For the People[4], and We Are Family[5]) and assumed the office of prime minister.

Matovič earnestly sought to fulfil his pre-election promises and formed a government that excluded SMER-SD. Yet, the coalition's inherent weakness, with SaS under Richard Sulík, For the People led by Andrej Kiska, and We Are Family under Boris Kollár, lay in the clash of strong leaders unable to forge sustained compromise and cooperation. This fragility became glaringly evident with the immediate challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic shortly after the government's formation. Matovič's clandestine negotiations with Russia for a supply of the Sputnik vaccine triggered a political crisis, ultimately resulting in his resignation (Holroyd, 2021). Although Matovič stepped down as PM, the tumultuous conflicts within the coalition persisted (Zuzelka, 2022). Eduard He-

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3   Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS), established in 2009 with Richard Sulík as its founder and long-standing leader, is positioned on the liberal-conservative spectrum, emphasizing economic freedom, reduction of national debt, and the support of personal freedoms. SaS has been part of several Slovak government coalitions, such as the Iveta Radičová administration from 2010 to 2012 and again from 2020 in a coalition led by Igor Matovič. In the 2023 elections, the Sloboda a Solidarita party secured 6.32% of the vote.

4   The For the People party, established in 2019 by former Slovak President Andrej Kiska, is centrist to centre-right, focusing on the rule of law, transparency in public administration, and support for social and economic reforms. It emphasizes the importance of civil rights, democratic principles, and sustainable development. In March 2020, Za ľudí became part of a four-party government coalition led by Igor Matovič's OĽaNO party. During the parliamentary elections in 2023, Za ľudí ran in coalition with OĽaNO and successfully secured one seat in the parliament, illustrating its ongoing, albeit limited, presence and influence on the Slovak political scene.

5   The 'Sme Rodina' party, established by Boris Kollár, positions itself within a populist and somewhat right-leaning ideological framework, with a focus on traditional family values, a sceptical stance on immigration, and calls for direct democracy and adjustments in social welfare policies. It highlights national interests and support for small and medium-sized businesses, aiming to represent the 'common people' against the established political elites. However, during the parliamentary elections of 2023, Sme Rodina obtained 2.21% of the votes, which resulted in the party not meeting the threshold for parliamentary representation, leading to its exit from parliament.

ger, the Minister of Finance from OĽaNO, assumed the role of prime minister, seeking to restore stability.

However, irreconcilable personal animosities between Matovič and SaS leader Sulík proved fatal for the coalition. Even after SaS's departure from the government in autumn 2022, internal strife continued within the coalition and OĽaNO itself. Eventually, by late 2022, another organizational crisis within OĽaNO led to ten of its MPs leaving its parliamentary club (Biró, 2022). This led to the collapse of the government through a vote of no confidence, compelling the president to call for snap elections due to the inability of existing parliamentary parties to resolve the deadlock.

Following the government's downfall, former Prime Minister Heger left the OĽaNO movement, expressing a commitment to unite right-wing political forces for early elections. Alongside four ministers from his interim government, he joined the Blue Coalition, formerly known as SPOLU. The party later rebranded itself as the Democrats, with Heger assuming the role of chairman (Hanák, 2023).

In summary, what the selected cases have in common is that the split from the parent parties was the only chance for the departing party elites to carry through their vision of the party. There was no, or very little, probability of alternation in the party leadership, and no possibility to reform the parent parties from the position of party leadership. The leaders of the parent parties did not permit any change in the leading post. For instance, although Fico formally offered Pellegrini the post of party leader, he did not agree to leave the party, nor was he willing to lose his influence over party affairs. Although the secondary motivations may have varied between one party and another, ranging from a chaotic leadership style, to the public image of the leader, to personal animosities, the main motivation for setting up a new party was the same for all the concerned parties – the inability to replace the leader in control of the parent party.

7. Data and Methods

As mentioned previously in the introduction, our research objective is to explore how breakaway parties differ from their parent (highly personalized) parties in regard to their party organization and in turn in regard to IPD. To that end, we analyse which party organizational features were adopted from the parent parties and how they affect the IPD of the breakaway parties.

This section examines how the analysis is operationalized and what kinds of data it relies on, starting with the methodology. In regard to the methodology, we explore the levels of IPD based on qualitative analysis of party organization. Concretely, this analysis involves assessing three different indicators that the literature considers as influencing IPD. These are the processes of leader selec-

tion and candidate selection and the position of the party leader within the party organization.

Simply put, the first indicator identifies who selects the party leader within the party, whether it is the delegates of the party congress, the party presidency, or any other arrangement. In this leader selection dimension, we are also interested in the length of a leader's term.

In regard to the second indicator, candidate selection, we investigate who has the autonomy to select candidates, and how this process is managed in the breakaway parties. We are chiefly interested in the selection process for candidates in general elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

The third indicator in itself is operationalized to include three aspects of the decision-making capacity of the party leader. This entails the leader's role and autonomy in regard to membership, party congresses and territorial branches. Regarding members, we investigate who approves and cancels party membership status. Concerning party congresses, we explore who summons them, and how often these events are held. In regard to territorial branches' autonomy, we study who is in the position to establish and dissolve them.

Altogether, the analysis of leader selection, candidate selection and decision-making power over membership, party congresses and the affairs of territorial branches will give us a clear picture of how each breakaway party approaches self-organization, and what this means for its IPD. In regard to data, our qualitative in-depth analysis draws from different types of primary data. Concretely, this includes various internal documents such as annual party reports, media reports, and party statutes. It is noteworthy that this methodological approach naturally has its limitations, as there always exists a certain space for disparity between the formal rules set forth in party documents and the informal practices within party organizations. The challenge to empirically capture this variation in party politics research is often bridged by conducting interviews with individuals from these institutions, which is a method we would like to include in our future studies on this topic.

8. Empirical evidence

In this section, we focus on the analysis of our findings and discussion of their implications for our three breakaway parties. Concretely, we focus on three aspects of party organization vis-a-vis the theory of political personalization and IPD – leader selection, candidate selection, and the role of party leaders within party structures. The latter indicator itself includes three dimensions – the decision-making capacity of the party leader in regard to membership, party congresses and territorial branches.

9. Leader and candidate selection

First we analyse who selects the party leader and candidates. Figure 2 illustrates the details of leader and candidate selection in for each case.

Starting with SMER-SD and its breakaway party HLAS-SD, our findings show that in regard to party leader's selection, these two parties are relatively similar. In both of them, the delegates of the party congress are solely responsible for selecting the party leader. The only difference between them is in the length of term of office of party leader. While in the former, the party leader serves in his/her position indefinitely until he/she is expelled by the congress delegates, in the latter case, party leaders are selected for a period of four years.

In regard to candidate selection, SMER-SD's candidates are selected by the party presidency, but the party leader must first propose this step (Article 12, SMER 2020). HLAS-SD's party statutes do not stipulate that party leaders be involved in this process, making the process less personalized and less dependent on the party leader (Article 5, HLAS 2021).

Regarding OĽaNO, the party statutes state that the party leader is selected only by party members participating in the party congress (Article 7, OLANO 2017), which in itself is a relatively restrictive measure considering the low number of party members – 61 in 2022 (Výročná správa, 2023). Although at first sight the rule does not seem to be strict, in reality only a relatively small circle of close associates decides about the post of party leader. For the Democrats, a more standard procedure is in place: party congress delegates select the party leader, who serves for only two years (Article 11, DEMOKRATI 2023). In contrast, in the parent party OĽaNO, party leaders remain in position for four years. In addition, another rather symbolic step towards 'de-personalization' within the Democrats was made when the party leader Heger stepped down as an electoral leader ahead of the recent election, allowing the former For the People MP Letanovská to take his place as the main face of the party in elections (Denník N, 2023), which at least publicly was a crucial decision.

As for SMER-SD (and unlike HLAS-SD), in OĽaNO the party leader proposes the candidate selection, which is executed by the party presidency; in the Democrats, only the party presidency runs the process without involving the leader individually.

Moving on to ĽSNS, the party congress delegates select the party leader (Article 9, LSNS 2021), but his/her appointment in this position is not time-limited (we will explain the relevance of this measure later in our analysis). Republika's party leader is selected by congress delegates for a period of four years (Article 8, REPUBLIKA 2021). In both ĽSNS and Republika, candidates are selected by the party presidency. In Republika, however, the personalized nature of the party was diminished by publicly de-radicalizing its rhetoric, and simultaneously by focusing on presenting two main faces in the recent campaign – Milan Uhrík and

Milan Mazurek, instead of single party leader (which was the custom in ĽSNS in the past).

The findings here illustrate that in regard to leader and candidate selection, the parent parties are more personalized than their breakaway parties. SMER-SD and ĽSNS do not limit the period for which leaders hold office at all, while OĽaNO effectively restricts who can select the party leader by having a limited number of party members. Concerning candidate selection, in contrast to all the breakaway parties (which are already relatively centralized by having the party presidency selecting candidates), two of the parent parties (SMER-SD and OĽaNO) go even further by having their party leader involved as the initiator of selecting them.

Figure 2:
Leader and candidate selection
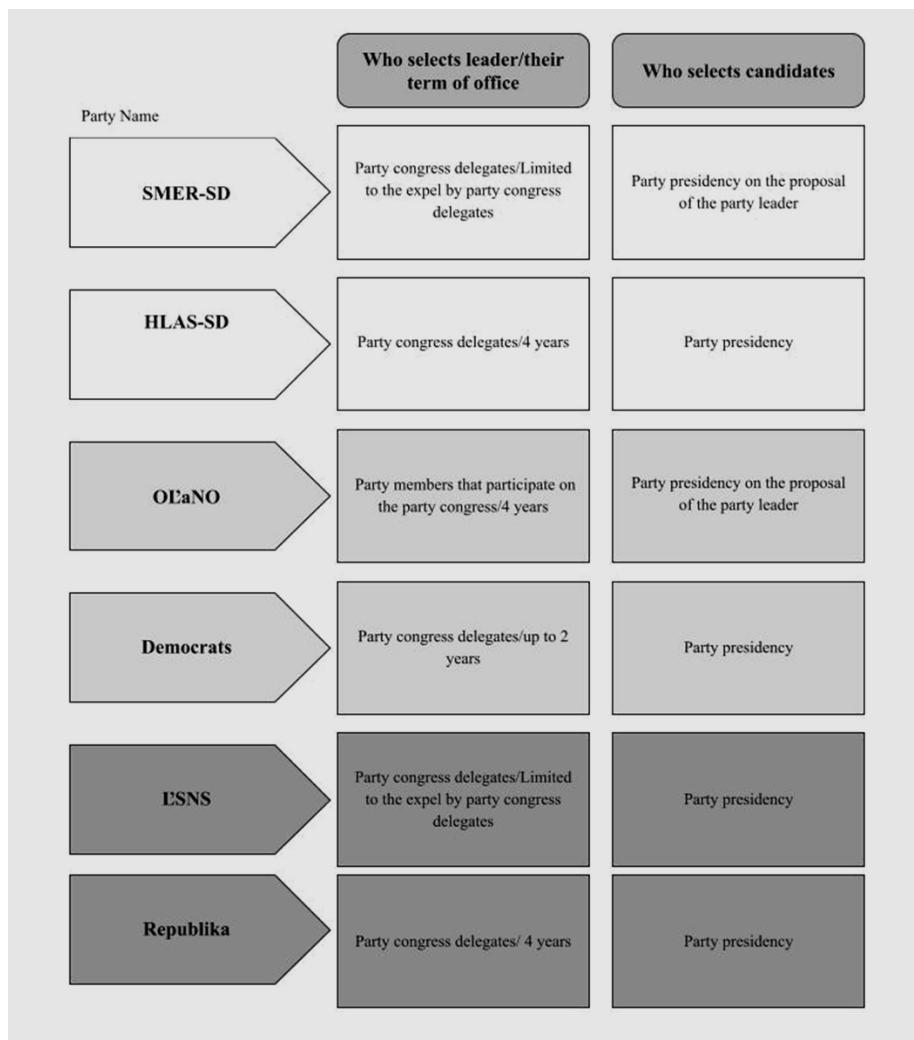
Source: Authors' elaboration based on party statutes.

10. Role of party leader in party structures

In this part of our analysis, we examine the role of party leader in party organization in regard to three dimensions of the leader's decision-making capacity. Concretely, this involves the party leader's power to make decisions about party membership, party congresses and territorial branches. See Figure 3 which illustrates the role of the party leader in regard to these three dimensions in each case.

Figure 3:
Role of party leader in party structures

Party Name	Who approves/removes members	Who summons congress/congress frequency	Who establishes/dissolves territorial branches
SMER-SD	District organization/District organization. The party presidency can expel a member who resigned from the party's parliamentary or MEP club	Party presidency/Minimally once per two years	Party presidency/Party presidency
HLAS-SD	Party presidency (or a regional organization authorized by it)/Party presidency	Party leader/Minimally once per two years or if requested by the refereeing commission, half of the party presidency or 4 regional councils	Party presidency on the proposal of the party leader/Party presidency on the proposal of the party leader
OĽaNO	Party leader or party presidency/Party leader or party presidency	Party leader/Convened by the party leader. No regularity is prescribed.	Territorial structures are not present
Democrats	Party presidency on the proposal of the general secretary/Party presidency on the proposal of the general secretary	Party presidency/Minimally once per two years	Party presidency on the proposal of the general secretary/Party presidency on the proposal of the general secretary
ĽSNS	Party leader/Party presidency	Party leader/When it is called by 2/3 of party presidency	Party leader/Party leader
Republika	Party presidency (or a regional organization authorized by it)/Party presidency	Party leader/Minimally once a year or when it is called by 2/3 of party presidency	Party presidency on the proposal of the party leader/Party presidency on the proposal of the party leader

Source: Authors' elaboration based on party statutes.

In this analysis, we start with party membership. Regarding SMER-SD and HLAS-SD, our data show that the breakaway party actually follows a more centralized and hierarchical model than the parent party. In HLAS-SD, the party presidency is solely responsible for approving and removing all party members

(although in regard to approval it may authorize the regional branch on its behalf) (Article 5, HLAS 2021). In contrast, SMER-SD has a much more IPD-friendly decentralized approach towards accepting and removing members (Article 7, SMER 2020). Our expectation is that this party membership strategy in SMER-SD comes from its social democratic roots.

In contrast, for OĽaNO and the Democrats, the parent party follows a far more personalized mode of membership, since all members are approved and removed by the party leader himself/herself. The party presidency is also involved, but the party leader maintains the main decision-making power in this regard (Article 8, OLANO 2017). Likewise, in ĽSNS the party leader has a decisive role in admitting all new members to the party. The party presidency only decides on removal from the party, but anyone wanting to join the party needs to be approved solely by the party leader himself/herself (Article 11, LSNS 2021). In this respect, the breakaway Republika is far less personalized than its parent party. While the party presidency removes party members, it may delegate the approval of new members to regional branches, which represents a relatively decentralized compromise in regard to IPD (Article 6, REPUBLIKA 2021).

Regarding party congresses, our findings indicate that SMER-SD as the parent party again represents a less personalized case than its breakaway party HLAS-SD. While in SMER-SD the party presidency calls for new a congress to convene at least once every two years (Article 11, SMER 2020), in HLAS-SD this is the sole responsibility of the party leader (Article 4, HLAS 2021). However, the party leader is bound by several rules stipulating when it should happen – at least once per two years, or if requested by one of the different bodies of the party organization (e.g. the referee commission, half of the members of the party presidency, or four of the party's regional councils).

In the case of OĽaNO and the Democrats, the parent party follows the more personalized model, possibly the most personalized of all the parties being considered here. OĽaNO's leader alone decides whether to summon a party congress, and the party statutes are not even transparent in regard to any timeline for it. This means that in OĽaNO, the party leader de facto has a free hand in organizing party congresses, and nobody else within the party can influence it (Article 8, OLANO 2017). In sharp contrast to its parent party, the Democrats convene a party congress every two years, and the party presidency is transparently responsible for this event (Article 11, DEMOKRATI 2023). However, perhaps the most complex and restrictive system of summoning a congress is found in ĽSNS. The leader's term in office is not time-limited, but he/she can only be replaced by a vote during a party congress. Importantly, ĽSNS can call for a congress only when either the party leader requests it, or when two thirds of the party presidency vote for it, but in ĽSNS the party leader handpicks half of the party presidency (Article 9, LSNS 2021). This means that the party leader de facto secures his position indefinitely. The only set of events that might allow for him/her to be outmanoeuvred

is if the party elite leaves the party and establishes a new one (which is exactly what happened with Republika).

In regard to the autonomy of the party leader over territorial branches, again the rules of HLAS-SD provide more power to the party leader than in its parent SMER-SD party. As such, HLAS-SD is more personalized in this regard, too. While in SMER-SD the party presidency votes and decides collectively on the establishment and dissolving of territorial branches (Article 12, SMER 2020), in HLAS-SD only the party leader has power to propose this (Article 2 and 3, HLAS 2021). Regarding the administration of territorial branches, OĽaNO is the perfect example of a centralized party organization since the party has no territorial branches. Contrarily, in the breakaway Democrats, the party presidency establishes and dissolves branches when instructed to do so by the general secretary of the party (Article 15, DEMOKRATI 2023).

In ĽSNS, all local matters are decided solely by the party leader, making it an extremely personalized party (Article 17, LSNS 2021). Republika follows a similar approach in regard to establishing or dissolving territorial branches, but in a slightly more depersonalized mode. The party presidency makes decisions over these party organizational changes, but only when the party leader proposes to do so (Article 13, REPUBLIKA 2021).

11. Conclusion

Our findings highlight how the party organizational features and IPD of the three Slovak breakaway parties compare to their parent parties. We expected that the organizational setup of our breakaway parties would follow that of their parent parties, which should have been reflected in their levels of institutional personalization and in turn IPD. Our findings do not indicate that the majority of the breakaway parties followed their parent parties in regard to how they are organized (i.e. in the level of institutional personalization and in turn IPD). It seems that, overall, the individuals who established the new breakaway parties may have acted in a reactive way, implementing different rules for organizing their new parties in order to avoid the kinds of developments that motivated them to depart their original parties in the first place.

Interestingly, although our analysis does not cover this, the election results indicate that the longer the break-away parties exist, the greater electoral success they achieve.

The findings related to the organizational features of our breakaway parties are not unambiguous in that regard. In the cases of the Democrats and Republika, these two parties are organized along different, far less-personalized lines their parent parties (OĽaNO and ĽSNS). The party statutes of both of these breakaway

parties lead to a less centralized and less personalized organizational setup than in their parent parties. Unlike OĽaNO and ĽSNS, where party leaders meddle significantly in the vast majority of crucial decisions, for instance in the selection of candidates, assembling party congresses, or making decisions about territorial branches and party membership, the Democrats and Republika opted for a more decentralized approach where decision-making powers are divided and delegated to different bodies of the organization. Overall, the power to make many decisions is not vested solely in the party leader, as is the case for their parent parties.

In contrast to the Democrats and Republika, HLAS-SD is a breakaway party whose statutes clearly favour the more centralized personalized approach to party organization. For HLAS-SD this is the case across the majority of indicators, more so than for its parent party SMER-SD – in regard to decisions over membership, congresses as well as territorial branches. Such a finding is puzzling, considering that HLAS-SD is the only one of the three breakaway parties that succeeded in securing seats in the recent general elections.

We also expected the party leaders of our breakaway parties to maintain control over the leader selection process as a safeguard of their own positions. Our findings do not indicate that the breakaway parties sustain control over the party leader selection process to the degree measured in their parent parties. While the party leaders in SMER-SD and ĽSNS have some sort of guarantee since their positions are not time-limited, the OĽaNO leader's position is more 'secure' since his/her fate is in the hands of only a limited number of party members. In contrast to their parent parties, HLAS-SD, the Democrats and Republika have relatively standard rules regarding leader selection, where leaders are selected by party congress delegates for a specific period of time.

Lastly, we expected that in the breakaway parties, leaders would have significant decision-making power over party structures. Regarding the Democrats and Republika, contrary to our third expectation, the party leaders' role in decision-making processes is not as important as in their parent parties. While within the parent parties the leader selects or removes members (and controls territorial branches, as well as congresses), in these two breakaway parties the decision-making structure is more decentralized and delegated to different levels of party organization, such as the party presidency or regional branches. However, consistent with what we expected, the role of party leader is significant in the third breakaway party – HLAS-SD, where the party leader maintains a relatively significant role. He/she proposes the establishment and dissolution of territorial branches and has more say in summoning the party congresses. Perhaps interestingly, however, is that in HLAS-SD, although it is formally on the more personalized side of our breakaway parties, the negotiation talks held after the elections signalled that the position of party leader Pellegrini may not be as firm. While the party leader attempted to initiate discussing a potential coa-

lition government with Progressive Slovakia, the party elite of HLAS-SD (largely composed of former SMER-SD MPs) overturned this effort and moved towards forming the government with SMER-SD instead (Grim, 2023).

To return to the existing theory and discuss our findings in light of it, our analysis demonstrates that breakaway parties exhibit a higher degree of transparency in their internal workings compared to their parent parties. This transparency is particularly evident in the selection of leaders, demonstrated through regularly held party congresses and clearly defined timelines for the leader's mandate (Cross & Blais, 2012, Scarrow, 2005). However, when it comes to candidate selection, the breakaway parties have not embraced greater inclusiveness, which would allow members to actively engage in this crucial process (Barnea & Rahat, 2007; Hazat & Rahat, 2010; Katz, 2001; Rahat, 2009). Qualitatively speaking, there is a noticeable trend towards intra-party depersonalization in most cases. From the perspective of IPD theory (Cross & Katz, 2013; Ignazi, 2020), this shift does not significantly enhance the opportunity for the broader membership base to participate in internal decision-making processes.

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Success or Failure of a Newcomer? The HLAS-SD Party as a New Player in the Slovak Party System[1]

Pavel Hynčica, Daniel Šárovec[2]

Abstract

This article is an analysis of the establishment and subsequent role of the HLAS-Social Democracy (HLAS-SD) party on the Slovak political scene with a focus on its position in the system of cooperative-competitive interactions in the early elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic in September 2023. First, it examines the new party in the broader context of the emergence of new political parties generally, which has been a long-term characteristic of the formation and development of the Slovak political system. Second, it investigates the ideological programmatic orientation of the party and its position in the scheme of cooperative-competitive interactions and cleavages in Slovak politics over the last three years. HLAS-SD represents a particular form of Slovak social democracy and, with this ideological orientation, faces competition not only from political parties of a different orientation but also from the programmatic sister party SMER-SD. Finally, the article maps the development of electoral support for HLAS-SD as captured by regular opinion polls and shown by the results of recent elections. Shortly after its establishment, HLAS-SD became for a time preferentially the most supported political entity, but later its electoral strength declined significantly. In this case study we analyse the party positions following the elections and, considering all three mentioned dimensions, explore the development of electoral support for HLAS-SD and its subsequent role in the party system.

2   PhDr. Pavel Hynčica, Ph.D., University College Prague, U Santošky 17, 150 00 Praha 5. Corresponding author: PhDr. Daniel Šárovec, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Pasteurova 13, 400 96 Ústí nad Labem. E-mail: daniel.sarovec@ujep.cz. ORCID 0000-0003-2491-538X.

1. Introduction

New political parties may play very different roles. They can be the actors who change the existing patterns of party competition. Although some may be forgotten very soon, others can be perceived as so-called 'game-changers'; one such game-changer has gradually emerged in the Slovak party system since 2020.

Here we are talking about the party *HLAS-Social Democracy* (HLAS-sociálna demokracia, abbreviation HLAS-SD), which recorded its best result in the early elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, NR SR) in September 2023. 'Hlas' means 'voice', but also 'vote', in Slovak. Our study consists of three levels of analysis. First, we analyse the entity as a new political party in the broader context of the emergence of new political parties generally, which has been a long-term characteristic of the formation and development of the Slovak party system. At the second level, we analyse the ideological programmatic orientation of the party and its position in the system of cooperative-competitive interactions and cleavages in Slovak politics over the last three years. HLAS-SD represents a particular form of Slovak social democracy and, with this ideological orientation, faces competition not only from political parties of a different focus but also from the programmatic sister party SMER-Social Democracy (SMER-sociálna demokracia, SMER-SD, 'smer' meaning 'direction'). Finally, we map the development of electoral support for the party as captured in regular opinion polls and by the results of the 2023 parliamentary elections. We aim to answer the following research questions: RQ1: What was the trajectory of the creation and development of the HLAS-SD party? RQ2: What programmatic anchoring was significant for the party from its inception to the 2023 elections? RQ3: Where did HLAS-SD receive key support in the 2023 elections?

Shortly after its establishment, for a time HLAS-SD became preferentially the most popular political entity, but later its electoral strength declined significantly. We look at the development of electoral support in connection with the issues mentioned above and analyse the characteristic features of HLAS-SD in the context of all three research questions. In a single-case study, we use qualitative and descriptive analysis methods to examine the origin and development of the party. Our primary sources are current academic research, monitored media outputs, legislation, party regulations, and the public statements of key political actors.

2. New political parties: research phenomenon versus Slovak practice

Researching new political parties is a well established area in political science. Such studies gradually appeared in the second half of the 20th century, especially the 1970s-80s. The following century saw the first systematic attempts at analysis – as part of large-scale comparative studies or theoretical and methodologically oriented contributions (see, e.g., Deegan-Krause, 2012; Bardovič, 2016; Havlík & Voda, 2016; Šárovec, 2016; Bakke, 2020).

The dynamics of the development of party systems in democratic countries make this a permanently relevant topic. In the countries of Central Europe, it is understandably relevant only after 1989 in the context of the establishment of democracy and the further development of political parties and party systems. All of this is evidenced by recent literature reporting individual case studies and by papers on comparative research on new parties and electoral volatility in post-communist Europe, including Slovakia (see, for example, Gyarfášová & Mesežnikov, 2004; Leška, 2013; Marušiak, 2017; Gyárfášová, 2018; Hynčica, 2019; Kerekeš, Pink, & Šedo, 2019; Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020; Linek et al., 2023).

Founding a new party is primarily a political project, but there are also legal barriers that must be overcome. Slovak Act No. 85/2005 Coll. on political parties and political movements sets the condition of a minimum of 10,000 petition signatures from citizens over 15 years of age. The preparatory committee of the new party must notify the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic that it has started collecting signatures of citizens who agree with the creation of a particular political party. The notification must be in writing and signed by each member of the preparatory committee (Slov-lex.sk, 2024; Minv.sk, 2024).

Table 1:
Extract from the Register of Political Parties and Political Movements

Name	HLAS-sociálna demokracia
Type	Party
Address	Lazaretská 2400/15, 811 08 Bratislava-Staré Mesto, Slovak Republic
Registration date	11 September 2020
Members of the preparatory committee	Peter Kmec, Matúš Šutaj Eštok, Peter Pellegrini

Source: Ives.minv.sk, 2024.

As Table 1 shows, HLAS-SD was registered on 11 September 2020. The total number of collected signatures was 94,414, as reported by the politician Peter Žiga on the social network Facebook on 14 August 2020 (Žiga, 2020). Peter Pellegrini was appointed the representative of the preparatory committee. The party uses

red and blue as its colours; the logo consists of a stylised speech bubble representing the voice, or the vote, of each voter/citizen (see Strana-hlas.sk, 2024).

3. The trajectory of the emergence: development in the SMER-SD party in 2018-2020 and the founding of HLAS-SD

The seeds of the formation of HLAS-SD can already be seen in events at the beginning of 2018. In March of that year, there was a change of government after Robert Fico's cabinet, which emerged from the parliamentary elections in 2016, resigned as a result of a political crisis that arose after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová. Fico's colleague in the SMER-SD party, Peter Pellegrini, who in the Fico government of 2016-2018 held the position of deputy prime minister for investments and informatisation, became the new prime minister in place of Robert Fico. Pellegrini was already an influential and established politician and, as the dominant figure of his party, held numerous important positions during the rise of his political career. In 2006, he became a member of the NR SR; in the second Fico government (term of office 2012-2016), he held the position of minister of education for a while and also served as chairman of the NR SR (2014-2016). At the SMER-SD party congress in June 2014, he was elected vice-chairman, and since then, has been among his party's most important representatives (see Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

The period 2018-2020 was characterised by a de facto dual government in the SMER-SD party. Peter Pellegrini was prime minister, while former prime minister Robert Fico remained SMER-SD chairman. A certain level of disharmony in relations between Peter Pellegrini as prime minister and Robert Fico as SMER-SD chairman was already visible shortly after the change of government in 2018 and became ever more evident over time as the parliamentary elections approached in 2020. A crucial milestone in this deteriorating relationship was the decision that the electoral leader of SMER-SD would not be the party's chairman, Robert Fico, but Peter Pellegrini (for the broader context see Marušiak, 2021; Smolecová & Šárovec, 2022; Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

The campaign before the elections in 2020 was marked by intense action and a strategic offensive by the political opposition at the time, represented mainly by the parties Freedom and Solidarity (Svoboda a Solidarita, SaS), Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO), the coalition of Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko, PS), and the Together (Spolu) and the For the People (Za ľudí) parties, the last of which was founded by former president Andrej Kiska shortly before the elections. This opposition

primarily exploited the affair of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, and the connection between this crime, either directly or indirectly, and the SMER-SD government; this became one of the cornerstones of the opposition's election campaign. In a broader context, this controversial matter is related to the deepening dissatisfaction of a large part of Slovak society with the long-term operation of governments in which SMER-SD held a decisive position. The facts mentioned above are evidenced by the development of SMER-SD's voter support.

After the 2016 elections the party had voter support of 25-30% (Gyárfášová, Bahna, & Slosiarik, 2017; Charvát & Just, 2018; Filipec, 2019). The crucial turning point was the events following the murder of Ján Kuciak, after which support for SMER-SD fell below the 20% threshold, and the party did not break back above this level until the 2020 elections (for more see Preferencie.teraz.sk, 2020).[3]

In the 2020 elections, SMER-SD won 18.3% of the vote and was placed second after the winning formation OĽaNO (which received slightly over 25% of the vote) (Havlík et al., 2020; Lysek, Zvada, & Škop, 2020; Smolecová & Šárovec, 2022). Thus, for the first time since 2006, SMER-SD was not the electoral winner and, compared to the previous long-term position of this party[4] on the Slovak political scene, the election results achieved were generally assessed as a failure, a view supported by the fact that, after the 2020 elections, SMER-SD found itself, after a long time, in opposition (Just, 2018, 2020).

The not-very-convincing election results and the subsequent role of the opposition contributed fundamentally to worsening relations between the two critical representatives of SMER-SD, i.e., Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini. In April 2020, i.e., less than two months after the elections, Pellegrini announced that he intended to run for the chairmanship of the party while the incumbent, Fico, declared his interest in continuing in that role. In June of the same year, at a press conference in Banská Bystrica, Pellegrini announced his resignation from the position of vice-chairman of SMER-SD and, for the first time, expressed his intention to leave the party in the foreseeable future, which he then did (Domov.sme.sk, 2020a). Subsequently, ten other deputies announced their departure from the party (among them SMER-SD leaders Richard Raši, Denisa Saková and Peter Žiga, as well as deputies Erik Tomáš, Matúš Šutaj Eštok, Ľubica Laššáková, Peter Kmec, Róbert Puci, Ján Ferenčák, and Ján Blcháč). This group became the basis of the newly founded HLAS-SD party (Strana-hlas.sk, 2020). As shown in Table 2, the whole process can be summarised with seven essential milestones connected with the beginnings of the existence of this new party.

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3   Support for political parties is regularly examined by several pollsters and the data are available in the media and on websites.

4   Let us recall the most significant electoral success of SMER-SD in 2012, when the party won 44% of the vote and was subsequently able to form a single-party government with majority support in parliament, all under a proportional electoral system (Stískala, 2014).

Table 2:
Seven crucial milestones in the foundation of HLAS-SD in 2020

Date	Milestone
10 June 2020	**Announcement of a new political party** At a press conference in Banská Bystrica, Peter Pellegrini announces his intention of founding a new political party.
17 June 2020	**'Pelle's Eleven'** Peter Pellegrini is joined by another ten members of the Slovak National Council. 'Pelle's Eleven' is born.
29 June 2020	**Party name and logo** Presentation of the name and logo of the party. At the press conference in Bratislava, the name of the party, HLAS-Social Democracy, and its visual identity is presented.
13 July 2020	**Start of 'Pelletón'** Pelletón – a series of events to collect signatures for the establishment of the party HLAS-Social Democracy – is started in Banská Bystrica.
14 August 2020	**94,414 signatures** 'Pelle's Eleven', together with volunteers, submit to the Ministry of the Interior 94,414 signatures, which were collected in one month.
11 September 2020	**The creation of the HLAS-SD party** At a press conference in Banská Bystrica, Peter Pellegrini announces the successful registration of the party HLAS-Social Democracy at the Ministry of the Interior.
28 November 2020	**Constituent Congress of the HLAS-SD party** At the congress, Peter Pellegrini becomes the chairman of the party HLAS-Social Democracy.

Source: Strana-hlas.sk, 2020.

HLAS-SD thus emerged as an independent political entity from the differentiation process in SMER-SD, which had been visible for a long time, as is evident from the previous discussion. The development of this new party contributed in many ways to a fundamental reformatting of the Slovak political scene and a shift in the positions and roles of individual party-political actors.

4. Successful development of HLAS-SD in Slovak politics: 2020-2023

Shortly after the establishment of HLAS-SD, the party achieved significant political success through strong polling performance. It garnered the support of a considerable number of voters, around 20%, while the original party SMER-SD fell below 10% after Pellegrini's group seceded (for more see Preferencie.teraz.sk, 2020). These changes are shown by the results of public opinion surveys by the Focus agency from 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 1).
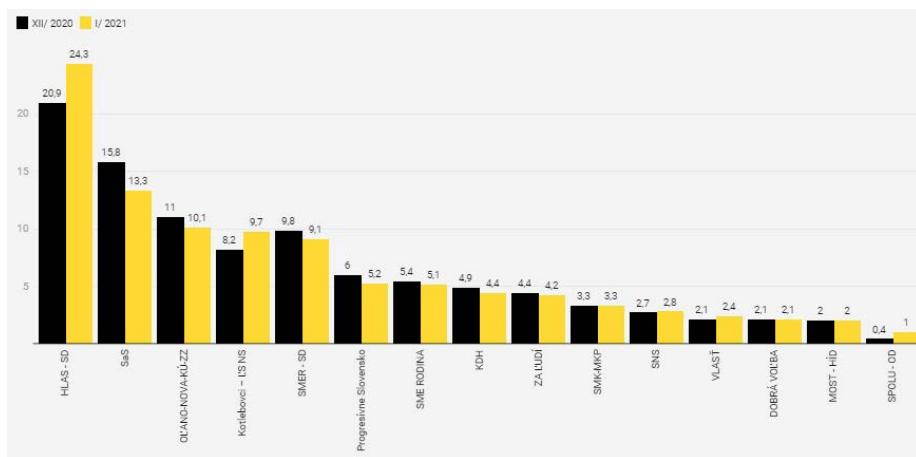
Source: Focus-research.sk, 2021.

Peter Pellegrini's personality was a crucial factor in the high level of support and successful establishment of HLAS-SD. He became highly visible, especially in the role of prime minister. At the end of his tenure in this role, he was briefly caught up in the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and thus there was a need to solve all the associated problems. Pellegrini was perceived as a breath of fresh air (especially in comparison to Robert Fico). His moderate and non-confrontational manner and willingness to solve issues in a practical way were repeatedly highlighted as his strengths. Pellegrini's popularity is shown in the results of the 2020 election, in which he received 413,555 preferential votes, almost double the number received by Robert Fico in this election (243,463) (Statistics.sk, 2020). And much of this support for Pellegrini from a significant part of the electorate persisted after the elections.

Although HLAS-SD was formed, essentially, by secession from a long-established political entity (SMER-SD), its strong voter support was primarily because it presented itself as a new political party, and in this respect it is similar to other successful new political parties in recent years and reflects the increasing importance of novelty in party politics (for more, see, e.g., Hynčica & Šárovec, 2018). Let us recall that the Slovak party system has long been considered relatively unstable, highly variable, and fragmented; that the increased rate of change of party-political actors is a long-term characteristic; and that there has been a constant stream of new political entities emerging (see Krno, 1999; Henderson, 2001; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2004; Kopeček, 2006, 2007). In almost every parliamentary election to date, a new political party has gained ground, and this is

especially characteristic in recent electoral terms (for more, see, e.g., Charvát & Just, 2018; Hynčica & Šárovec, 2018).

From its beginning, the position of the HLAS-SD party was evident – as a specific political alternative both to the government coalition comprising OĽaNO, SaS, We Are Family (Sme Rodina), and For the People, formed after the 2020 elections, and to the SMER-SD party consisting after the departure of Pellegrini's group of those who remained loyal to the chairman Robert Fico. Further political development in Slovakia since the 2020 elections was primarily determined by the advancing governance crisis of Igor Matovič's cabinet that emerged from the 2020 elections (Smolecová & Šárovec, 2022). Corresponding to this is the clear and continuous drop in support for OĽaNO after the 2020 elections (from the 25% obtained in those elections support fell to approx. 8-10%) (see Preferencie. teraz.sk, 2020).

The government was repeatedly criticised for its lack of ideas, for its chaos, and for its improvisation in solving severe social problems. OĽaNO leader Igor Matovič fundamentally contributed to this. Matovič is generally a very singular politician characterised by an unusual political style (radical anti-establishment rhetoric, non-standard forms of communication with excessive confrontation, etc.). This is how he presented himself, significantly as an opposition politician; but even after entering government, he did not change his unique political style substantially. Matovič was the main personal symbol of unsuccessful governance in Slovakia in the period after the 2020 elections. In line with this, he gradually became the least popular politician in the long term. A key milestone in the long-term governance crisis of Matovič's cabinet was the change in the head of government at the turn of March and April 2021, when Matovič was replaced as prime minister by Eduard Heger (Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

In this situation, HLAS-SD took advantage of the long-term problematic governance and associated low popularity of Matovič's government as one of the opposition parties, further consolidating its position as its support stabilised at around the 20% mark as mentioned above. For a certain period, the party became the strongest political entity in terms of voters' preferences. It was easier for HLAS-SD to win over disillusioned voters of the government parties than it was for SMER-SD, mainly because of the long-standing opposition to Robert Fico (Domov.sme.sk, 2020b). This contrasted with the continuing high popularity of Peter Pellegrini, who led the popularity ranking of politicians.

After the secession of Pellegrini's group and the formation of HLAS-SD, SMER-SD found itself in an even more pronounced political defensive position and, in a certain sense, the crisis of the party that had been germinating since 2018 came to a head (Rossi, 2020). The party suddenly had to cope with new competition from HLAS-SD, with whom it vied for similarly focused voters. Statistical data confirm the movement of some former SMER-SD voters to HLAS-SD (for more, see, e.g., Preferencie.teraz.sk, 2020). Thus, in the 2020-2023 electoral

term, the dimension of competition between the old and new political parties was manifested in the opposition camp (cf. Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020). Among other reasons, HLAS-SD stated that it wanted to distance itself from the past of SMER-SD and focus its politics more on the future (Strana-hlas.sk, 2020).

5. HLAS-SD and the re-establishment of SMER-SD

Slovak politics in the 2020-2023 electoral term was characterised by the parallel operation of two very similar political entities with subtly different ideological programmes, positions in the political scene and electorate characteristics. Both SMER-SD and HLAS-SD had a social democratic orientation, but they perceived aspects of this orientation a little differently. HLAS-SD emphasised universal values, the importance of European integration and the European dimensions of politics in general (Strana-hlas.sk, 2020), thereby identifying itself more with the social democratic politics of such parties in (especially Western) Europe.[5] With this emphasis on universal and European values, HLAS-SD was also close to liberal parties, particularly regarding values (for more on this, see below). In contrast, SMER-SD moved ideologically in a nationally conservative direction after the separation of Pellegrini's group. Fico increased emphasis on the national pillar in the politics of social democracy. SMER-SD presented itself as a specifically Slovak variant of social democracy, which held conservative and rustic values (Marušiak, 2021; Strana-smer.sk, 2023). Accordingly, he rejected more progressive topics (the LGBTQ+ and environmental agendas etc.) and placed more emphasis on traditionally left-wing issues (see, e.g., Blaha, 2018; Marušiak, 2021).

In terms of their positions in the political scene, the parties were characterised alike by their oppositional role. They were political allies, cooperating and coordinating their activities, especially when expressing no confidence in the government of Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger or its individual ministers (Hnonline.sk, 2022).[6] At the same time, however, SMER-SD and HLAS-SD were political competitors within the opposition to the government coalition, especially to some of its constituent parties (for more see below). SMER-SD presented itself as a fundamental and uncompromising opposition to the government coalition and, for a long time, declared this in relation to all its political components. There

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5   In this context, let us recall the current official name of the social democratic group in the European Parliament: the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

6   The opposition parties SMER-SD and HLAS-SD tried to express no confidence in the government quite often in the 2020-2023 electoral term, targeting certain ministers, especially the minister of the interior, Roman Mikulec.

were mutual antagonisms between government and opposition (Hnonline.sk, 2020; Ta3.com, 2022).

The deepening crisis of governance in the coalition formed after the 2020 elections was a fundamental factor in the significant political rise of the opposition and, within it, the part that was more radical and uncompromising towards the Matovič and Heger governments. It became increasingly clear that, unlike HLAS-SD, SMER-SD could take full advantage of the real or imagined transgressions of the governing coalition, especially the significant decline in its popularity among voters. In 2022-2034, SMER-SD was known as the party that could take the strategic initiative and actively bring topics and agendas to the public debate. Mainly, these have been economic and social issues fitting the basic profile of the party, which promotes a form of social democracy based on solving people's (primarily social) problems (with an emphasis on traditionally left-wing topics; see above). Such problems have been exacerbated by a number of serious crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and its consequences (see Ta3.com, 2022). Beyond that, SMER-SD placed the rule of law on the public agenda in connection with problems such as the control of part of the judiciary, the prosecutor's office and the police by people politically close to the government coalition and the subsequent abuse of these bodies against the opposition, and the so-called war in the police. The significantly offensive political strategy of SMER-SD manifested itself in particular through the party's frequent and repeated press conferences, which received significant attention in the media (see Hnonline.sk, 2023). SMER-SD effectively consolidated itself after the internal party crisis, culminating in the secession of Pellegrini's group, and this consolidation contributed to SMER-SD's subsequent political rise. The more active SMER-SD became in opposition, the more HLAS-SD found itself on the political defensive. Pellegrini's public profile became less and less prominent, and over time, HLAS-SD was less able to compete with SMER-SD, especially in showing it had the ability to take the strategic initiative and raise issues, for example, at press conferences (Marcišiak & Kiššová, 2023; Schuster, 2023).

Due to the historic strong personification of Slovak politics, comparison of the party leaders, Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini, and their roles in the activities of their parties became clearer. A unique phenomenon of the development of Slovak politics in 2021-2023 was the dramatic political comeback of Robert Fico, who, above all, personified the political rise of SMER-SD. As he became more politically active, his popularity rose to the top of the rankings. Peter Pellegrini maintained a relatively high popularity among Slovak voters, but compared to Robert Fico, he symbolised indecisiveness.

The different degrees of intensity of the political activities of Fico and Pellegrini were limiting factors in their mutual relations, which had been complicated for a long time, stemming from the party split in 2020. It became more and more evident that this complicated relationship was a crucial factor

in preventing SMER-SD and HLAS-SD from being considered political allies until the 2023 elections (whether such an alliance would be ideological, pro-grammatic, or interest-based). At the same time, Fico exploited the growing popularity of Pellegrini, both for himself and the SMER-SD party, and also for a vigorous opposition strategy, while support for the government coalition declined continuously.

An example of this strategy was Fico's repeated calls to Pellegrini to state clearly whether HLAS-SD was counting on a coalition with parties such as PS or SaS after the elections. In this way, Fico pushed Pellegrini further into a de-fensive, centrist (and thus, in a certain sense vacillating) position. In a political scene sharply divided into the two blocs mentioned above, this was the only option left for HLAS-SD somehow to defend the meaning of their existence (Biró, 2023). A clear tilt by HLAS-SD, either towards SMER-SD or to the progressive liberals (PS, SaS), would only contribute to the outflow of voters from the party. Even the continuing relatively autonomous position of HLAS-SD vis-à-vis SMER-SD did not prevent the growth in support for SMER-SD continuing, while support for HLAS-SD stagnated at best, or declined (for more, see, e.g., Preferencie.teraz.sk, 2020). Here we are dealing with distinct trends, which were fully confirmed by the results of early parliamentary elections at the end of September 2023.

6. HLAS-SD and early elections to NR SR 2023

The long-term deepening crisis of the government coalition formed after the 2020 elections ultimately led to early parliamentary elections on 30 September 2023, which confirmed the distinct trends we have analysed above. SMER-SD won with over 22% of the vote (see Table 3). The factors involved in this success, such as strong leadership, explicit opposition to the government coalition, an emphasis on a na-tionally conservative form of social democratic politics and on topics with a strong mobilisation potential (criticism of migration, etc.) were more and more evident in the politics of this party as election day approached. On the other hand, HLAS-SD's (above-mentioned) defensive position became more evident during the election campaign (Strana-hlas.sk, 2023a). Not very favourable forecasts of HLAS-SD's election result were made by its representatives during the election campaign.

Table 3:
The 2023 Slovak parliamentary election results

Party	Votes	Vote (%)	Seats
SMER-SD	681,017	22.94	42
PS	533,136	17.96	32
HLAS-SD	**436,415**	**14.70**	**27**
OĽaNO, KÚ*, and Za ľudí	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, 2023. Only parties winning more than 5% of the vote are listed.
* Christian Union (*Kresťanská únia*)

A geographical breakdown of HLAS-SD support shows that the 'Pellegrini factor' led to the greatest support for the party in Pellegrini's home district of Banská Bystrica, where it received 22.09% of the vote, the most of all the candidate lists. There was a relatively strong position in central Slovakia and HLAS-SD pushed SMER-SD into second place in four districts of eastern Slovakia – Svidník, Medzilaborce, Snina, and Sobrance (Mikušovič & Kerekeš, 2023a; Tomečková, 2023).[7]

Compared with the 2020 election, there was a swing of more than 150,000 votes from SMER-SD to HLAS-SD. It won support from tens of thousands of voters who previously preferred Sme Rodina, OĽaNO, or SaS. The party also attracted new voters who, for various reasons, did not come to the polling stations in the NR SR 2020 elections (Mikušovič & Kerekeš, 2023b).

While during the campaigning SMER-SD only confirmed its profile based on traditionally left-wing and national-conservative attitudes, HLAS-SD and the statements of some of its representatives showed a partial reassessment of the orientation of the party to embrace a European and more liberally oriented form of social democratic politics, making the party appear more progressive than SMER-SD. HLAS-SD entered the elections with messaging that supported the idea of a strong state, which was one of the basic building blocks of the party's entire campaign. The key election slogan that appeared on the party's billboards was 'Only a strong state helps the people' (Silnystat.sk, 2023). Chairman Peter Pellegrini dominated the visuals (see Picture 1).[8]

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7   Despite this, SMER-SD won in most of Slovakia's districts (Tomečková, 2023).

8   The message *Your VOICE for a strong state* is powerfully present in the visual as depicted in Picture 1.

Source: Author's archive, 2023.

The party created a new website, silnystat.sk, meaning 'strong state', to present its manifesto (Silnystat.sk, 2023) to distinguish itself clearly from liberal-oriented entities that promoted a more limited role of the state, especially SaS. At specific points, it indicated its conditions for post-election cooperation with other parties. Before the elections, HLAS-SD declared it would prefer to cooperate with parties that would support social policies aimed at helping older people, families, and working people. It stated that it would not cooperate with parties that rejected '13th month' pension payments, the state's decisive role in food, energy, and banking policy, and those that would abandon plans to equalise regional differences (Silnystat.sk, 2023; Strana-hlas.sk, 2023). This shows a clear shift towards traditional left-wing themes on the part of HLAS-SD.

Another indication of a shift in the politics of HLAS-SD was in the statements of numerous HLAS-SD representatives, which said the party was abandoning its central position between two distinct party-power blocs, one around SMER-SD and the other around Progressive Slovakia, and preferred cooperation with SMER-SD as a programmatically close party. This was the initiative not so much of HLAS-SD chairman Peter Pellegrini himself, who had a complicated relationship with SMER-SD leader Robert Fico, but rather of other senior party figures Matúš Šutaj Eštok and Erik Tomáš. On the one hand, they openly admitted the possibility of post-election cooperation with SMER-SD while, on the other, they explained why HLAS-SD should not enter into coalition with Progressive Slovakia

(Spravy.pravda.sk, 2024). Ultimately, the party joined a government coalition with SMER-SD and SNS.

7. HLAS-SD after the 2023 elections

After the announcement of the election results, it was not clear which direction HLAS-SD would take in the post-election negotiations between the political parties that had been elected (Strana-hlas.sk, 2023b). The distribution of forces confirmed the existence of two power blocs on the Slovak political scene, and accordingly two possible variants of government coalition with majority support in the parliament – SMER-SD, HLAS-SD, and SNS (with a majority of 79 seats) and PS, HLAS-SD, KDH, and SaS (with a majority of 82 seats). Such a possible distribution of forces, including the electoral leaders of individual parties, is shown in Table 4; in both variants HLAS-SD would play a significant role.

Table 4: Two possible government coalitions including HLAS-SD

National Council of the Slovak Republic (total 150 seats)						
SMER-SD (42 seats)	HLAS-SD (27 seats)	SNS (10 seats)	PS (32 seats)	HLAS-SD (27 seats)	KDH (12 seats)	SaS (11 seats)
R. Fico	P. Pellegrini	A. Danko	M. Šimečka	P. Pellegrini	M. Majerský	R. Sulík
Total 79 seats			**Total 82 seats**			

Source: Statistics.sk, 2023.

Within the political constellation emerging, a visible 'centre' position for HLAS-SD was becoming clear. However, more important than the position of HLAS-SD itself, the statements of other political parties, especially the progressive liberal ones, became a more decisive factor. The primary intention of Progressive Slovakia and SaS was to create a government without SMER-SD. To this end, both parties wanted to negotiate a coalition with HLAS-SD, with representatives of PS and SaS offering significant concessions to achieve this. These parties proposed that the prime minister of a potential coalition of HLAS-SD, PS, KDH and SaS would be the leader of HLAS-SD Peter Pellegrini, even though HLAS-SD only came third in the elections (with 14.7% of the vote) after PS (which was placed second with 18% of the vote) (Statistics.sk, 2023).

HLAS-SD held parallel negotiations with both major power blocs (i.e., SMER-SD and SNS on the one hand and PS, KDH, and SaS on the other). At the same time, news of internal conditions in HLAS-SD and the opinions of its leadership in the party's presidium indicated which of the two potential coalitions had greater

support in the party. The post-election negotiations resulted in a memorandum of understanding to form a coalition between SMER-SD, HLAS-SD, and SNS, confirming the hints by HLAS-SD in the run-up to the election that they favoured a coalition with SMER-SD. What was crucial, as reported by the media at the time, was that HLAS-SD had played a significant role in the formation of a new Slovak government (Chovanec & Luppová, 2023).

The relatively smooth course of the post-election coalition negotiations among the parties only further confirmed the gradual convergence of ideas, programmes, and interests of SMER-SD and HLAS-SD. Just a few days after the signing of the memorandum, as mentioned earlier, a coalition agreement was signed between SMER-SD, HLAS-SD and SNS, based on which a new government was formed, with the leader of the winning SMER-SD party, Robert Fico, as prime minister. It was agreed that HLAS-SD would appoint seven ministers in the government: Denisa Saková (deputy prime minister and minister of the economy), Peter Kmec (deputy prime minister for the recovery and resilience plan and the use of European funds), Richard Raši (minister of investments, regional development, and informatisation), Matúš Šutaj Eštok (minister of the interior), Erik Tomáš (minister of labour, social affairs, and family), Tomáš Drucker (minister of education, science, research, and sport) and Zuzana Dolinková (minister of health). As part of the agreement between the three coalition parties, Peter Pellegrini became the speaker and Peter Žiga one of the deputy speakers of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, while important government and parliamentary positions were taken by key representatives and founders of HLAS-SD, Pellegrini, Saková, and Žiga (Vlada.gov.sk, 2024).

This staffing of the highest constitutional institutions indicates the possible later direction of HLAS-SD within the government coalition. In the case of ministers M. Š. Eštok and E. Tomáš, the issues mentioned above concerning the development of the HLAS-SD profile in social and security policy were confirmed in a form that is very close to the SMER-SD policy in terms of programme and interests. On the other hand, the fact that HLAS-SD members who had been somewhat critical of SMER-SD (T. Drucker, Z. Dolinková, and P. Kmec) also became members of the government indicated efforts to satisfy and balance the not always compatible interests and attitudes within the party (Vlada.gov.sk, 2024). For the government term 2023-2027, the prerequisites for the stable functioning of HLAS-SD within the newly formed government coalition had thus been created.

8. Conclusions and further challenges

As a newcomer to the party system, Peter Pellegrini's HLAS-SD party received *de facto* immediate support from Slovak voters shortly after its establishment, when it led the polls for a significant time. It was primarily the personality of the founder and leader of the party that attracted massive crowds of supporters. But how to identify a party as such in the context of its newness?

In response to RQ1 we note that even though HLAS-SD collected an impressive number of signatures on the petition sheets necessary for establishing a new party, it was definitely not a genuinely new political party built from scratch. Although HLAS-SD fulfilled all the necessary formal requirements determined by law for a new party, crucial for its success were factors directly linked with SMER-SD. It was to Peter Pellegrini that a part of the SMER-SD electorate, as well as some former politicians of the party, switched. Pellegrini and his fellow party members also had particular political and organisational experience and a suitable and clearly set out centre-left programme.

In response to RQ2, we have showed that the party was strengthened by its criticism of the government, the figure of its leader, and by its liberal style of social democratic politics. The slogans promoting a strong state, generous social policy, help to the needy, and the intention of balancing regional differences were repeatedly emphasised. Compared to SMER-SD, it was, on the one hand, a competitor, and, on the other, a new entity (with familiar faces), which profiled itself as a left-wing alternative for Slovak voters.

In response to RQ3, it can be said that although HLAS-SD gradually dropped from first to third place in opinion polls taken as the 2023 elections to the NR SR approached, it became a real game changer, on which the further post-election development in Slovakia in large part depended. From the range of options, the two most plausible remained on the table, and HLAS-SD thus had to decide whether to form a coalition government with Fico's SMER-SD or with Šimečka's PS. The first option won for several reasons described above.

The importance of the role of the HLAS-SD party and its chairman, Peter Pellegrini, was no less crucial after the 2023 NR SR elections, with two more contests, the 2024 presidential election and the 2024 European Parliament elections. The presidential election was a major turning point as Pellegrini became the new Slovak president when he defeated Ivan Korčok in the second round in April 2024 (Statistics.sk, 2024a). Just before the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, Pellegrini was replaced as the head of the party by Minister of the Interior Matúš Šutaj Eštok (Spravy.pravda.sk, 2024). In the EP election, HLAS-SD won one seat with 106,076 votes, which represented 7.18% of the total (Statistics.sk, 2024b).

These election results confirmed that the Peter Pellegrini 'brand' scored in the presidential elections. However, as Slovak president, he is expected to adopt a certain degree of non-partisan approach, and this may affect not only the

position of HLAS-SD in the government coalition but also the party's performance in the next elections. It is, therefore, a challenge for further research to analyse whether HLAS-SD, even if Pellegrini becomes substantially non-partisan as president of the country, will continue to be able to anchor itself as a stable element in the Slovak party system, which is characterised by the frequent formation of new parties that are short-lived.

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

**Veronika Bundzíková,
Denis Janšta**[2]

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.

2   Department of Political Science, Masaryk University, vbundzikova@mail.muni.cz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3043-251X, Joštova 218/10, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. Department of International Relations and European Studies, Masaryk University, jansta@mail.muni.cz, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7563-8568, Joštova 218/10, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic.

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, Nad' 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.

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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