

## DEMOS H2020 Project - Case study (task 6.3):

# Impact of Populism on the Party System in Slovakia 2000–2020<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This study employed a threefold criterion of increase, relative stability or decline of support for populist parties between two time points, 2000 and 2020 (originally meant to be based on the “Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index”)(Kubát, 2020). As we explain further, for comparison we actually selected 2002 and 2020 periods when general elections were held, with some additional in-between key periods (following general elections) considered. The research approach was based on hypothesis that there are four clusters of European democracies in which the support for populists varied (case selection based on typical examples). In particular, it was assumed that Slovakia was a democracy in which the support for populist parties was smaller in 2020 than in 2000 (but not trivial) (Kubát, 2020). This key hypothesis was not proved – however, the correct answer to this hypothesis very much depends on definitions, tools and sources used, as well as period in question (a few months can make a huge difference, as well as factors such electoral period, successful or not election campaign<sup>2</sup>, or being in opposition or in government), as we shall discuss further.

Furthermore, the research sought to test the following hypotheses (Kubát, 2020): representation gap hypothesis (populist parties pursue a strategy that is designed to exploit gaps of representation by means of emphasizing new or re-vitalizing old conflicts); contagion

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<sup>2</sup> For example, OĽaNO had preferences four months (November 2019) before elections around 7.6% according to AKA polling agency or 5.7 % by Focus polling agency. <https://preferencie.teraz.sk/>. However, it won 25.920 of eligible votes in February 2020 general elections.

hypothesis (the rise of populist parties is accompanied with an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties); polarisation hypothesis (the rise of populist parties makes party systems more acutely polarised); elective affinity coalition hypothesis (populist parties enter governing coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if the latter also employ at least one of the typical themes of populist discourse, e.g., nationalist, nativist, ant-establishment, Eurosceptic themes)(Kubát, 2020). The results are partly different than expected according to these hypotheses, and they should also be explained differently in some aspects (i.e. not necessarily by definition normatively negatively).

After this introduction, and further below discussion about methodological challenges, with the aim to test above mentioned hypotheses, we introduce political context, followed by discussion on the role of populist parties play in the political life of the country, explaining longevity and success or failures of some populist parties in the political arena. We discuss whether rise of populist parties is accompanied with an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties. We also attempted to identify what type of political party system exists in Slovakia and why is this so.

### **Methodological Challenges**

This study faced methodological challenges. First, systematic, valid, and rigorous cross-national measurement of the worldwide populist phenomenon is missing (Norris, 2020). Second, dominant national political science discourse (as presented in the Attachment 2) seemed to be little able to differentiate among changing patterns of political party ideological developments, associated rhetorics and sometimes different policies, especially if we had to rely on limited sources (recommended 250 words).

Third and related, allocated space (4,000 words) seemed to be not sufficient for tackling such ambitious research goals with relevant validity and reliability. There have been quite many political parties/movements that were seen by one or another author or populist index as populist during the twenty years in question. In fact, we ended up with over 23,000 words (or almost 13,000 words without sources and attachments). Still, this is exploratory research rather than full-fledged research.

These research challenges complicated our assesesment of impact of populist parties on the party system. For example, one could find *Smer-SD* party that was in power for 12 years

throughout twenty years in question (either as the key coalition partner or in a single party government) included into some rankings of populist parties (e.g. Kyle and Gultchin, 2018) or in many (especially local) academic papers and discourses.<sup>3</sup> However, for example Zulianello (2019) did not include *Smer-SD* among populist parties. Similarly, TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index (TAPI) did not include *Smer-SD*. Yet TAPI claims to be “a comprehensive outlook on the growth of populism in European politics”.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it includes following allegedly or really populist parties: *SNS* (Slovak National Party), *LSNS* (People’s Party – Our Slovakia)<sup>5</sup>, *LS-HZDS* (People’s Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia), *Sme rodina* (We are a Family, *WAF*), *ZRS* (Association of Workers of Slovakia), *KSS* (Communist Party of Slovakia) and *P-SNS* (The Right Slovak National Party). Although all these parties (some no longer relevant or existing) showed some signs of demagoguery combined with populism, strictly speaking, within this sample only *WAF*, and to a certain degree (especially historically) *LS-HZDS*, could be seen both as truly - conceptually correct - populist and at the same time relevant political party in the examined period. For example, *KSS* was traditional communist party. Parties with transparent and fixed ideologies usually can not be included into purely populist party family. As put by Rydgren (2017), it is misleading to label radical right-wing parties – such as in our case *Kotlebovci-LSNS* - as primarily populist parties, since populism is not the most pertinent feature of this party family. Still, when describing these parties, populism or populist label may be used in a more restrictive way, as a conditional qualifier, for example, that the ethnic nationalism tends to be populist, as suggested Rydgren. Similarly, Rooduijn (2018) argues that it is easy to confuse populism with related concepts like, for instance, ‘nativism’ and ‘Euro-scepticism’. Populism may not be nativist or Euro-sceptic. Moreover, both nativism and Euro-scepticism express some nucleus or more pronounced ideologies (e.g. nationalism, conservatism), and thus may reflect more demagoguery that in may represent reflect some other, deeper socio-political issues. The more correct conceptual understanding or differentiation of fully populist and partially populist parties (where we can understand populism more as demagoguery and/or as a part of more transparent and more pronounced ideology) can be seen in - to be discussed - the *PopuList* index. Before moving to this alternative index, it should be mentioned that surprisingly, TAPI did not include clearly populist anti-establishment and anti-corruption movement *OLaNO* (*Ordinary People and Independent Personalities*) either. In short, when using TAPI we would have to ignore two

<sup>3</sup> See for example, three political scientists discussing *Smer-SD* as „national populist party“, [Smer-SD je podľa odborníkov národne populistická strana, má klesajúcu tendenciu a môže sa radikalizovať](https://www.webnoviny.sk/smer-sd-je-podla-odbornikov-narodne-populisticka-strana-ma-klesajucu-tendenciu-a-moze-sa-radikalizovat/) (22. 02. 2020), <https://www.webnoviny.sk/smer-sd-je-podla-odbornikov-narodne-populisticka-strana-ma-klesajucu-tendenciu-a-moze-sa-radikalizovat/>

<sup>4</sup> Methodology, <https://populismindex.com/data/>

<sup>5</sup> Previously known as *Kotleba-Ludová strana naše Slovensko*, currently *Kotlebovci-Ludová strana naše Slovensko*

rather important (partially/occasionally or fully populist) political parties – *Smer-SD* and *OLaNO*.

In contrast to TAPI, both *Smer-SD* as well *OLaNO* have been included into the *PopuList* dataset.<sup>6</sup> This is an alternative list of populist, far right, far left and Eurosceptic parties that are split into these four separate analytical categories. Thus, the *PopuList* includes *Kotlebovci-LSNS* (as “right wing” and “eurosceptic” party), *SNS* (“right wing, **populist** and eurosceptic”), *SaS - Freedom and Solidarity* (“eurosceptic”), *WAF* (“right wing, **populist** and eurosceptic”) and *Smer-SD* together with *OLaNO* as only or purely “**populist**” parties. However, *Smer-SD* was much of the time not exclusively populist party, but it has evolved into (imperfect) social democratic party that occasionally (e.g. especially during pre-election periods), and with a long-term decreasing tendency (especially when in government) used populist demagoguery. As we shall discuss further, there was some further retreat from ideal-type social democratic ideology since 2016/2017 (more on rhetorical level than in actual policies while in government).

We see that neither the *PopuList* nor TAPI is correct guide for us although the *PopuList* also claims to be “one of the most complete, up-to-date, and carefully designed classifications of populist, far left, far right and Eurosceptic parties in the field.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, if we would rely on TAPI guidance, or the *PopuList* respectively, our results would be different and in both cases, analytically misleading. Moreover, neither *the PopuList* dataset is entirely correct source of knowledge, as we shall see at the example of (transformation of) *Smer-SD*, and on questionable inclusion of (evolving) *SNS* party in late 2010s - formerly nationalist, conservative in social values but leftist or rather light populist in economy policies. This party underwent an attempt at ideological transformation during its last term in the parliament (2016-2020).

This is all methodological discussion of a fundamental nature – we have to be sure which parties were not only seen as (more or less) populist and which were seen as (more or less) non-populist ones by observers or experts, but also why. This issue is possibly less relevant for countries with just one or two populist parties, but it is still important from a comparative perspective.

<sup>6</sup> The PopuList 2.0 (Data), <https://populistorg.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/01-thepopulist.pdf>,

<sup>7</sup> The Populist List. About, <https://popu-list.org/about/>

Considering our methodological challenges, we carried out an experimental pre-research. For that purpose, we asked two local researchers to write draft of this study based on limited number of sources, as defined in the task description. However, we found that their approach (see Attachments 1 and 2) was very much influenced by simplified and too general analytical approach historically established by a few local specialists especially in case of *Smer-SD* party. In both studies, the authors adhered to the idea that *Smer-SD* has always been populist party. In one case, a researcher correctly noticed problems with TAPI index if utilised in local conditions. In other words, one can get rather different answers on the same research questions than those answers presented in this study, if one uses a) only TAPI index, b) limited number of (mostly local) sources (there are available usually much higher quality scientific publications produced by foreign authors).

Therefore, we used the third dataset - Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (*POPPA* – party means)<sup>8</sup> which provides most calibrated assessment on individual indicators. According to the *POPPA*, it was by far *LSNS*, with the highest populism level - 9.27 - among all relevant Slovak parliamentary political parties, followed by *WAF* (7.83), *OLaNO* (7)<sup>9</sup> and *SNS* (4.43). Surprisingly, *Smer-SD* had populism value under 4.

Still, the major problem with *POPPA* index is that it apparently measures both rhetoric and policies but in a mixed and blurred way. Moreover, considering complex nature of this assessment, assessors can not be experts in all fields they assess (e.g. migration, Euroscepticism). At the end, they had to rely very much on media reporting. We shall discuss paradoxes related to *POPPA* index later on.

### Defining Populism among Parties

It should be noted that leaders play very important role in Slovak party politics (Kopeček, 2004, Žúborová, 2011). This has to do more with design of electoral system than with other factors, as we shall discuss further. However, it has impact on populism among political parties. As a result, majority of relevant parties in the parliament is strongly associated with their leaders.<sup>10</sup>

It seems that it may be easier to answer which parties were not considered to be clear-cut populist cases in the period in question: in the **2020-present** (early 2021) **government (Matovič)**, it was *Za ľudí* (For the People) and partially *SaS*– 3.3 points (it was seen by some

<sup>8</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B>

<sup>9</sup> This is in line with the findings from our Facebook content analysis from WP2 report, so even discursively, *WAF* is visibly more populist than *OLaNO*.

<sup>10</sup> Until recently, before the change of law in 2019, two parties had the name of their “founder” and leader included in their names.

observers as nativist - 5.6 points in POPPA list, eurosceptic -3.9 points in POPPA list and anti-immigrant party – 1.5 points in POPPA list); in the **2016-2020 government (called Fico III.)**<sup>11</sup>: it was *Siet* (The Network), that disintegrated almost immediately after the elections and *Most-Híd* (The Bridge); in **2012-2016 government (Fico II.)**, there was a single party government by *Smer-SD* (which was not that much populist, as we shall see); in the **2010-2012 government (P.M. Radičová)**<sup>12</sup>: *SDKÚ-DS*, *Most-Híd*, *KDH* and *SaS* (all seen as little or not at all populist, except partially *SaS*); in the **2006-2010 government (Fico I.)**<sup>13</sup>: theoretically no party could be seen as non-populist, if we consider that there were parties *Smer-SD*, *ĽS-HZDS* and *SNS*. Analytically, though, *ĽS-ZHDS* and *Smer-SD*, were relatively rather less populist in their policies during this government. Moreover, as we have already mentioned, *SNS* could be included among right-wing parties (with populist rhetoric, or policies, being part of that ideology). It is simply true that *Smer-SD* as well as *SNS* were value-based (if we do not use term ideological terms) and rhetorically different parties in early 2000s period than in in late 2010s, and also *ĽS-HZDS* was different party in 2006-2010 period than some fifteen years earlier.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, probably the best methodological approach towards such ambiguous and evolving parties' positions is to measure populism in a multi-dimensional and continuous manner in line with the POPPA expert survey since populism is a latent construct (see also Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009).

Finally, in the **2002-2006 government (Dzurinda II)**: *SDKÚ-DS*, *SMK*, *KDH*, *ANO* (the later party claimed to be a liberal party but was seen as centrist populist (Slosiarik, 2011), see more in Dočkal, 2002). Indeed, Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009, 828) used their own assessment of populist rhetoric, and found for Dzurinda II. Government the most populist part was *ANO* (0.5 at 0-1 scale), followed by *SDKÚ-DS* (0.42), *KDH* (0.25) and *SMK* (0.25).

Considering number of governments and parties in question, and their changing (increasing or decreasing) populist attitudes (at rhetorical level, especially during election campaigns), the following text will prioritise the analysis of the most important party in question – *Smer-SD*. Moreover, due to limited space allocated, we focus primarily at comparing two key periods - 2002 and 2020 – and composition of parliament during these two points in history. In both years, general elections were held.

<sup>11</sup> See Government of Slovakia, 2016-2020, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/vlada-sr-od-24-03-2016-do-20-03-2020/>

<sup>12</sup> See Government of Slovakia, 2010-2012, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/vlada-sr-od-09-07-2010-do-04042012/>

<sup>13</sup> See Government of Slovakia, 2006-2010, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/vlada-sr-od-04-07-2006-do-08-07-2010/>

<sup>14</sup> For example, it showed 0.88 degree of populism (scale 0-1) in 1990-1992, while it was 0.71 in period 2002-2006, according to Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009, 828) original calculations.

## Political Context

### What role do populists play in the political life of the country?

Traditional left-right ideological division is not transparently present in the Slovak political party system (Zala, 2020a,d). Moreover, populist rhetoric is present in both the left and right sides of the political spectrum. However, the left-right socio-economic cleavage (reflecting voters' preferences) is present since the early 2000s (Hloušek and Kopeček, 2008). Previously, in the 1990s, Slovak voters placed more weight on national and democracy issues when evaluating political parties (Deegan-Krause, 2000). Thus, on the one hand, populism has become over time somehow less nationalistic and more socioeconomic in its rhetoric and affiliated ideologies among major parties throughout 2000-2020 period. This helps to explain the growth of *Smer-SD*, but not that much of *OLaNO*, as we shall see. However, the rise of *LSNS*<sup>15</sup> and *WAF* support claims that nationalistic, xenophobic and (hidden) anti-systemic features (for *LSNS*), or right-wing social populism (for *WAF*), have crystallised in some minor but relevant parties. Yet, although Mesežnikov (2016) claimed that it had been populist parties that ruled the country since the fall of communism most of the time, and, moreover, these populist parties contributed mostly in a negative way to political and economic transformation, this is perhaps too strong statement. Firstly, to confirm the first part of the statement, one would have to include *Smer-SD* among typical populist political parties. However, as we already mentioned, this is not so clear cut issue. In fact, *Smer-SD* that had ruled during much of the period between 2000 and 2020, showed decreasing level of populism in its rhetoric especially once it was in power (Mislovič, 2015). In part, its initial anti-establishment populism was a rational rejection of both authoritarian excesses of Mečiar and neoliberal reforms by Dzurinda (Zala, 2020a,b). The most noticeable retreat from *Smer-SD*' populist rhetoric could be noticed between 2002 and 2010 elections campaigns (Zajac, 2014). Moreover, the first move towards more social-democratic position could be noticed already before 2002 general elections (Beneš, 2013). It is true that its ideology initially did not fulfil complete profile of social democracy either – there were missing cultural and human-rights dimensions, while supra-national dimension and the dimension of equality and freedom *Smer-SD* were met only partially or not at all (Marušiak, 2006). Indeed, *Smer-SD* ideology has changed between 2002 and 2006, when *Smer-SD* adopted a (more) social democratic profile and largely abandoned its once populist appeals, or at that time, „third way“ experiment. After winning the 2006 election, the ideological transformation was finalized as

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<sup>15</sup> The party is officially called since late 2019 Kotlebovci-LSNS.

*Smer-SD* proclaimed itself (perhaps a bit prematurely) to be a "standard" party (Spáč and Havlík, 2015). Apparently, there were still quite many issues that lowered coalition potential of *Smer-SD* after 2010 general elections. These included confrontational political style by its chairman, programmatic issues, clientelism and ethnic nationalism (Mesežnikov, 2011, 63-64). In 2012 general elections, socio-economic factor was clearly strong in determining vote for *Smer-SD* (with unemployment level growth in a region by a 1%, also support for *Smer-SD* raised by 0,48 %) (Baboš and Malová, 2015). In 2017, *Smer-SD* was seen: "....., in terms of its rhetoric, a traditional socialist party, speaking to the poorer strata, advocating a welfare state, but in reality the party pursues fairly strict austerity policies with occasional 'social packages'. .....the leaders of *Smer-SD* are prone to using national and populist appeals." (Malová, 2017).

This transformation in strategic behaviour, programme, and intra-party democracy of *Smer-SD* was largely influenced by the *Party of European Socialists* (Berge (2017)). Since then, populist rhetoric was more often than not just a supplement to *Smer-SD* social democracy ideology. The intensity of populist rhetoric increased while it was in opposition or during pre-election periods. The *Smer-SD* occasionally used populist rhetorics and policies, showing rather low populist rhetorical intensity level in the late 2010s as seen in POPPA assessment.<sup>16</sup> Finally, some key policies of *Smer-SD* during its last term in government (2016-2020) were only a little populist, except the very last period during 2020 election campaign (Školkaý, Daniš, Vass-Vigh, Bednárík and Smieško, 2020). There also was present the anti-liberal and conservative shift of *Smer-SD* after 2017, and especially after nation-wide political crisis in spring of 2018 (Marušiak, 2021). Boris Zala, former MEP for this party, located the beginning of this ideological shift into 2016 year, and he saw it as moving possibly towards Mussolini-type fascism (Zala, 2020c). This radicalisation was caused by lowering of the importance of social issues in political discourse, the increase in influence of conservative and far-right forces in Slovakia and abroad, and the negative attitude of liberals towards cooperation with *Smer-SD* (Marušiak, 2021). However, the main (for society and the state) and longer problem with *Smer-SD* seemed to obtain another dimension than populism or changing aspects of ideology – it was the rule of law, or, more precisely, accusations of grand corruption of the captured state under patronage of *Smer-SD*, that was raised as the main objection against possible coalition with *Smer-SD* by main party challengers. The scope of partial state capture

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<sup>16</sup> Based on expert assesment, it showed rather low populism level - 3,96 magnitude of populism at 10 points scale (indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism), <https://poppa.shinyapps.io/poppa/>

started to be revealed in 2019, and was finally revealed in the 2020.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned, Matovič, as the key figure of *OLaNO*, was most successful to embody this topic. As put by his party fellow Sopko (2020), Matovič's transparently and in simple way communicated anti-corruption messages that led to trustworthiness of him and his *OLaNO* (before the general elections).

Perhaps unexpectedly, both radical right-wing party *LSNS*, and populist parties *OLaNO* and *WAF*, together with parties *PS/Spolu*, *Za ľudí*, and *SaS* became the key opponents or at least challengers of *Smer-SD* led coalition (2016-2020). In contrast to *OLaNO*, *PS/Spolu* focused its criticism more against *LSNS* in pre-election period in 2019/2020. This was a mistake, as the elections results have shown.

### **For how long are populists present in the political arena?**

It is true that various (first „national“) populist parties (*HZDS*, later *LS-HZDS*), but also (formerly) nationalist right wing *SNS*<sup>18</sup>, and also, at ideological margins, the radical left (*ZRS* in 1994-1998 government) and then, two decades later, radical right (present in Parliament, *LSNS* since 2016 and 2020 general elections) and right-wing populist party *WAF* (2016, 2020), little populist and with changing ideological orientation right-wing *SNS* (since 2016), as well as valence populist actor (*OLaNO*, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020), have all received relevant support in the general elections throughout certain periods of the last 30 years. Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová (2008, 9) call the period in the 1990s as “hard” or authoritarian populism, while since 2002 until 2008 there was present “soft”, or mostly non-authoritarian populism. This is probably correct observation from the point of authoritarian tendencies, with caveats mentioned earlier and later. One can include here additional valence populist parties, such as one-term parties *SOP* and *ANO*, and (initially) more populist (“third-way”) *Smer* (later renamed to *Smer-SD*) have gained significant electoral support (1998-2006). *SaS* could be seen as partly populist (Slosiarik 2012) but it was established in 2009. However, as mentioned, it was mostly *Smer-SD* that ruled the country most of the time during period in question, either uniquely in a single-party government (2012-2016) or in coalition governments (2006-2010, 2016-2020).

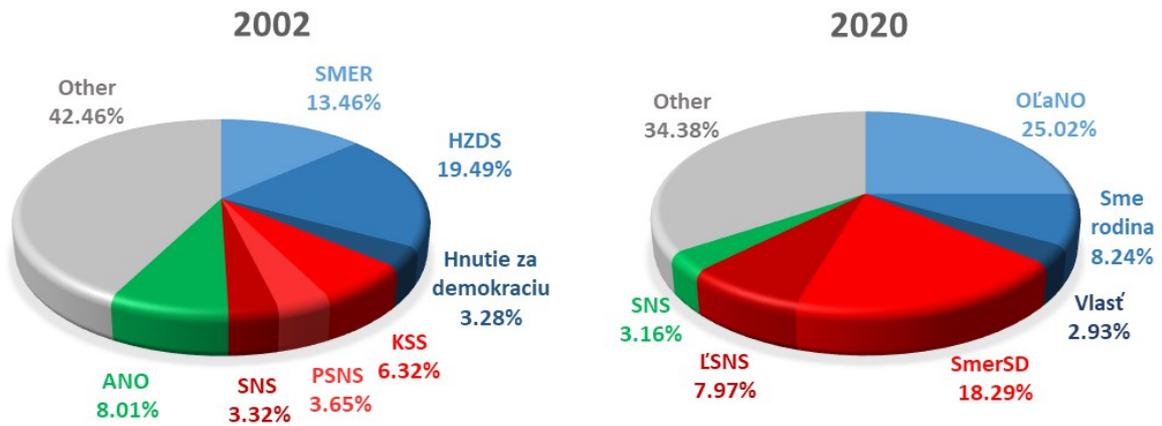
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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Monthly *N Magazin*, “V službách mafie” [In the service of Mafia]. January 2021, further Kauzy 2020 (Causes 2020), *Aktuality Magazine*, and “Udalost' roka 2019: Kočnerova mafia” [Event of the Year 2019: Kočner's Mafia]. December 18, 2019, <https://dennikn.sk/1691447/udalost-roka-2019-kocnerova-mafia/>

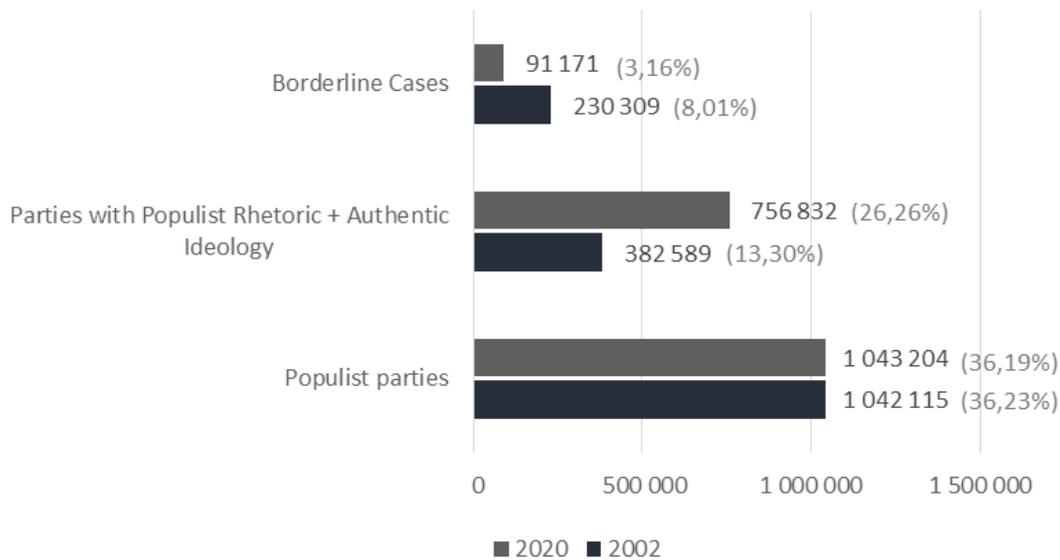
<sup>18</sup> For example Pirro, 2014, defined *SNS* as populist radical right.

Regarding long-term trend in populism up to this day, one can say that country has reached in a way similar situation in 2020 to that it was in 2002 (after the general elections in that year). This can be seen in following tables and charts.

**Chart 1: Populism in General Elections: Slovakia 2002 - 2020**



blue - Populist parties  
red - Parties with Populist Rhetoric + Authentic Ideology  
green - Borderline Cases



	2002		2020	
	Votes	Share	Votes	Share
Populist parties	1 042 115	36,23%	1 043 204	36,19%
Parties with Populist Rhetoric + Authentic Ideology	382 589	13,30%	756 832	26,26%
Borderline Cases	230 309	8,01%	91 171	3,16%

<b>Populist parties</b>	SMER	387 100	13,46%	OĽaNO	721 166	25,02%
	ĽS-HZDS	560 691	19,50 %	Sme rodina	237 531	8,24%
	Hnutie za demokraciu	94 324	3,28%	Vlast'	84 507	2,93%
<b>Parties with Populist Rhetoric + Authentic Ideology</b>	KSS	181 872	6,32%	Smer-SD	527172	18,29%
	PSNS	105 084	3,65%	LSNS	229 660	7,97%
	SNS	95 633	3,32%	-		
<b>Borderline Cases</b>	ANO	230 309	8,01%	SNS	91 171	3,16%

Trend in success of pure (valence) populist parties success was identical between 2002 and 2020 general elections. However, and perhaps not that much surprising, parties with populist rhetoric and authentic ideology - including those with anti-system ideology, have doubled their success. Logically, success of borderline cases has shrunk. In summary, while populism remained at the same level, ideologically backed radicalism has increased. Surprisingly, support for clearly (analytically, not legally) anti-system parties (*KSS*, *LSNS*) remained more or less identical if compared over 20 years span.

We could go even further into the past, comparing the general elections in 1994 and 2020. The populist winner *OĽaNO* symbolically replaced populist *HZDS-RSS* (*RSS* was a minor electoral coalition partner - Farmers Party of Slovakia, while *OĽaNO* had affiliated some other minor electoral partners), *WAF* in 2020 symbolically replaced then *SNS/ZRS*. Some of the anti-populist parties such as *Most-Hid* or *KDH* did not get into the Parliament in 2020 (similarly to *DS* in 1994). Of course, any such comparison is more symbolic than real. However, what is important here, it was re-emergence of populism as driving factor of voters decision making in case of some key partners of follow-up governmental coalition. Moreover, *OĽaNO* was populist, but different from *HZDS* in the key aspect – *OĽaNO* did support the rule of law (however, with some constitutionally problematic measures taken related to pandemic situation, but also in other constitutional areas, see Zala, 2020c) and especially fight against grand corruption and captured state, while *HZDS* acted in opposite way. Similarly, the success of the *LSNS* could be attributed to persistent ethno-nationalist trend in Slovak politics which runs through Slovakia's national development from pre-communist times to the present, with migration crisis as an additional catalyst (Harris, 2019, Budajová, 2018)<sup>19</sup>, and *SNS* by and large abandoning nationalism under new leadership.

<sup>19</sup> This could be nicely illustrated when checking opinion polls – *LSNS* became a relevant political force after the 2015 year, after manufactured securitisation of migrant crisis, see <https://preferencie.teraz.sk/>.

After the 2020 general elections, then the again re-emerging-populist, left *Smer-SD*<sup>20</sup> together with its little populist partner *SNS* (centre-right)<sup>21</sup>, as well as *Most-Híd (Bridge)*<sup>22</sup>, a relatively populism-free Hungarian minority civic party, were replaced in the government by the protest anti-corruption populist movement *OLaNO*<sup>23</sup> and right-wing social populist *WAF*.<sup>24</sup> The winner of the elections was *OLaNO*. Interestingly, while *OLaNO* was seen as the least institutionalised<sup>25</sup> party, both *KDH* and *Most-Híd* were seen as highly institutionalised parties (Rybář and Spáč, 2020). However, puzzlingly, Haughton (2014) and Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2018) argue that comparisons of the collapsed and surviving parties in Central and Eastern Europe indicates a significant role for three factors: organization on the ground, a clear position on an enduring issue dimension, and ability to change party leadership. Since both *KDH* and *Most-Híd* had organisations on the ground and proven ability to change party leadership in case of *KDH*, it appears that – if Deegan-Krause and Haughton hypothesis is correct - what played role in their failure was unclear position on some enduring issue dimensions. For *KDH* it was possibly informal pre-election agreement with liberal *Progressive Slovakia* and civic *Spolu* party<sup>26</sup>, while for *Most-Híd* it was most likely staying in coalition after murder of Ján Kuciak. However, success of *OLaNO* suggests that no party organisation on the ground is needed. It is true that there were enduring issues that were typical for both populist parties. The two populist parties that succeeded in 2020 general elections, differed in their populism. While Matovič as leader of primarily anti-corruption movement *OLaNO* used populism more as marketing tool, and did not focus at people perceived as being different (no “othering strategy), Kollár and *WAF* utilised populist rhetoric openly, clearly anti-establishment focused, and clearly using othering strategy (Marincea-Školkay, 2020), with social populism present also in *WAF* electoral programme.

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<sup>20</sup> Based on expert assesment, it showed rather low populism level - 3,96 magnitude of populism at 10 points scale (key indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism).

<sup>21</sup> Based on expert assesment, it showed rather low populism level (4.43 magnitude on 10 points scale, key indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism).

<sup>22</sup> Based on expert assesment, it was not populist either – showing only 0.33 magnitude of populism on 10 points scale (key indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and antielitism)-

<sup>23</sup> The full name is OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti, NOVA, Kresťanská únia, ZMENA ZDOLA. It has changed its name three times since its founding. This change reflects legal requirements of electoral law in case of coalitions. See more about its early years in Rolko (2012).

<sup>24</sup> We used typically used abbreviation in the former case, and our own suggested abbreviation in the latter case. There is no established local abbreviation for *Sme rodina*, and occasionally used foreign abbreviation „SR“ does not seem to be clear enough. In the Slovak language, „SR“ means abbreviation of the official name of the state.

<sup>25</sup> Indicators: autonomy, cohesion, embeddedness and systemness.

<sup>26</sup> <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22164651/progresivci-spolu-a-kdh-sa-dohodli-na-spolupraci.html>

As perhaps more truly social democratic alternative to *Smer-SD*, *Hlas – sociálna demokracia* (Voice – Social Democracy) has been established by splitting faction of this party, led by Peter Pellegrini (former P.M.) in September 2020.

The new governing four-party coalition is composed from two political currents – one clearly populist and one less populist or not populist subjects. On the former side there are the dominant *OLaNO* movement led by the Prime Minister Igor Matovič and having varied opinions / attitudes within its rank (including some other minor parties or representatives from these parties). The *OLaNO* can be best described as an ad hoc group without a typical party organizational structure and, until forced to do by the law, without really relevant membership base.<sup>27</sup> The movement “*WAF*” is a pool of little known party members associated around its relatively charismatic and relatively media proficient chairman Boris Kollár. Frič and Gyárfášová (2019) label both political entities as populist, anti-establishment parties.

On the other side of the new coalition there are two less numerously represented, less (or selectively populist) or non-populist parties: *SaS*<sup>28</sup> – a traditional liberal party, with some populist policies/approaches – and *For the People (Za ľudí*, centre-right, not populist).

### **Are they successful (if so, how)?**

As mentioned, the former opposition is in power largely due to feeling that there was widespread high level grand corruption, clientelism and partially “captured state” (Innes, 2014, Školka, 2018) that has been revealed since the murder of data journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018. There are three opposition parties in the parliament after the 2020 general elections: *Smer-SD*, *Hlas – sociálna demokracia*, and *Kotlebovci-ĽSNS*.

Bakker and Sitter (2013) identified five factors that involve particularly high political risk for political parties in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. Changes in the salience of cleavages and the electoral system (system factors) and three that were directly linked to the parties’ strategies for competition: whether they participate in coalition government as a junior partner, how they manage internal dissent, and the party’s organisational strength.

The above mentioned factors are relevant for populist parties, too. While the changes in the salience of cleavages will be discussed in part tackling electoral manifesto, the electoral system is of paramount importance here. With the partial exception of Hungarian ethnic

<sup>27</sup> For example, among only 53 MPs for *OLaNO*, only 9 were party members. In: Dušan Mikušovič (2021, February 1), Šéf klubu OĽaNO Šipoš: Igor Matovič neútočí ako prvý, <https://dennikn.sk/2249314/sef-klubu-olano-sipos-igor-matovic-neutoci-ako-prvy/>

<sup>28</sup> *SaS* populism index according to the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) was rather low – just 3.3 points on 10 point scale.

parties (that have their core electorate in the South of the country but still compete nationwide), all relevant political parties have a nationwide reach without a need to consider regional specifications. Importantly, Slovakia constitutes only one electoral district for all nation-wide elections, including the elections to the European Parliament. This means that a politician on the list of candidates of any political party stands for the whole territory of Slovakia. This is a unique electoral system among V4 countries. In effect, leaders of political parties or their executive committees, play decisive role in selection of candidates or, at least, in setting the rules of the game (Spáč, 2016, see also Kaliňák, 2021, also in Frank, 2020). As a result, somewhere between a third and half of MPs have domicile in and around the capital city (Lichý, 2016). Moreover, this helps to explain important role of political leaders in general and in case of populist political parties in particular. The type of national electoral system also contributes to disenchantment of voters with their MPs (Beblavý, 2015). However, some argue that change of electoral system may not have fundamental impact on election results (Spáč, 2011, Tkačenko, 2018).

EU membership had only a limited impact on party organization and programmes across the region. Nonetheless, in the realm of party politics the EU acted as a constraint, a source of spill-over and a point of reference (Haughton, 2009) and a measure of competence (Haughton & Marek Rybář, 2009). In case of Slovakia, the EU integration triggered coalition formation and parties' alignment along ideological lines (Octavian, 2008).

Both short-lived populist liberal party *ANO* party (Dzurinda II) and *Smer* were able to capitalize on disillusionment created by failures in domestic policy. A mixture of personality feuds<sup>29</sup>, ideological disagreements and poorly-run 2002 election campaigns helped produce disappointing results for three established political parties in Slovakia: *HZDS*, *SNS* and the *Party of the Democratic Left (SDL)* (Haughton, 2003). In contrast, *Smer*, in addition to facing a weaker opposition in critical issue areas, *Smer* also benefited significantly from an increase in the salience of issues on which it held competitive advantages (Rybář-Deegan-Krause, 2008, 513). *Smer* used rhetoric and preferred policies of „social pragmatism“ (Zadorožňuk, 2011).

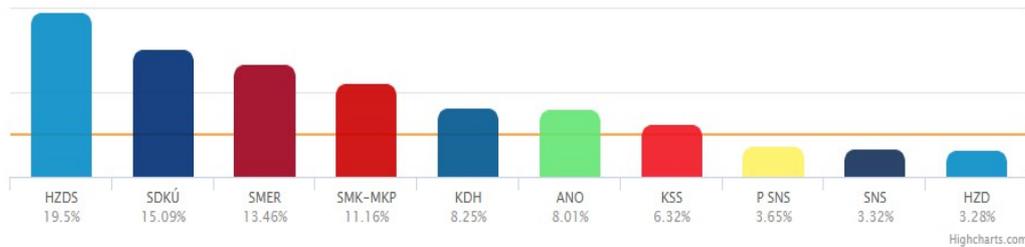
### **Are populist parties relevant or marginal, in power or not?**

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<sup>29</sup> In particular, in 2002 *LS-HZDS* began to face internal struggles: a series of defections by second-tier party leaders and a softening of the party's criticisms of government in the hope of restoring its position as a potential coalition (Rybář-Krause, 2008, 512).

None of the non-populist parties that formed the government after the general elections in 2002 is present in the Parliament after 2020 general elections. Some no longer exist (SDKÚ-DS, ANO), others did not pass the threshold (KDH, Most-Híd). Yet populist parties received almost identical support both in 2002 and 2020 general elections, as can be checked again in the Table 1. The failure of populist and right-wing (nationalist) parties to form a government in 2002 was largely due to split of SNS.

**Chart 2: The 2002 General Elections Results**



**Chart 3: The 2020 General Elections Results**

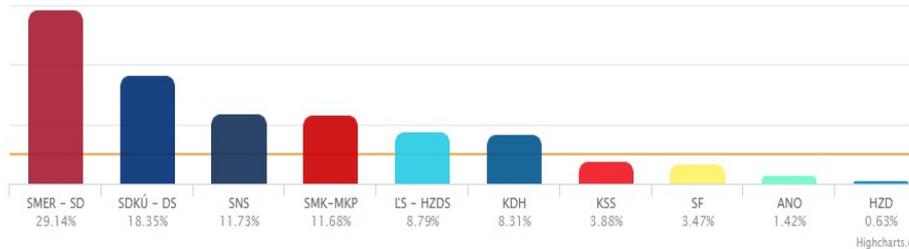


Source: [vysledkyvolieb.sk](http://vysledkyvolieb.sk)

The 2006 parliamentary elections in Slovakia highlighted the evolving pattern of party competition, from one dominated by questions of the character of the political regime, illiberal democracy and nationalism into one in which socio-economic themes were of key importance for political parties. Nevertheless, although socio-economic themes became more salient, other dividing lines that shaped Slovak party politics in the 1990s, especially national appeals, remained significant for smaller, niche parties (Haughton & Rybář, 2008). The key factors that allowed change away from by and large non-populist parties after the 2006 general elections was the weariness of the elite conducting the transformation (Füzes 2007, 155). This weariness laid the foundations for anti-corruption and anti-establishment populism, and gave rise to pronounced anti-(post)communism in Poland (and partially in Slovakia) and

anti-neoliberalism in Slovakia. Since Dzurinda’s two governments reforms were equated with the growth of inequality, the promise of anti-liberal redistribution has proven the most popular agenda (Füzes, 2007, 156). Ironically, Makovicky (2013, 87) pointed out that the second Dzurinda government sought to recruit populist themes of ethnicity and nationhood to justify the implementation of stringent welfare reform. By situating their political rhetoric within the wider parameters of competing, populist narratives, Dzurinda’s coalition members appeared to be engaging in a form of “authoritarian populism”. However, this was probably just one area of policy making in which this type of populism was present. The 2006 general elections still represented dominant conflict cleavage on reforms versus social welfare state (Leška, 2013, 82).

**Chart 4: The 2006 General Elections Results**



After the 2006 elections, Fico’s first Government was formed. We have discussed half-populist features of this government earlier. *Smer-SD* headed by Robert Fico has also won in 2010 and 2016 general elections. However, after 2010 elections there was short-lived Radičová’s government. In 2012 *OLaNO* first time as independent entity entered the Parliament, and in 2016 general elections it was *LSNS* that passed the threshold to the Parliament together with another right-wing populist movement, *WAF*. At the same time, the 2016 government presented dissolution of the previous ideological and ethnic lines (Kováčová and Jankurova, 2017). Finally, the 2020 general elections brought additional raising political trend – radical parties such as *LSNS* and *Vlast’ (Patria)*.

**The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

**Do populist parties pursue a strategy that is designed to exploit gaps of representation by means of emphasizing new or re-vitalizing old conflicts?**

It is useful here to point at difference between typical populist parties and parties that use populist rhetoric but show some ideological orientation. If we use comparative research results for *LSNS* (as mentioned, the most populist yet not typical populist party), we see that populist radical right voters in Central and Eastern Europe countries show lower levels of associational membership and social trust but higher political participation when compared to voters of other parties. This highlights the importance of taking into account demand-side explanations of fringe party politics (Buzogány, 2021). Indeed, Bakke and Sitter (2013) listed changes in the salience of cleavages as one of five factors involve particularly high political risk for political parties. Rather than emphasizing new conflicts or re-vitalizing old conflicts, typical populist parties (in contrast to radical right parties) in Slovakia criticise some policies of governing coalition (if they are in opposition) and raise issues that are silent in a society, or not (seen as) tackled sufficiently or at all by established parties. For example, the clean-corrupt divide was integral of *Smer*'s initial appeal (Haughton (2014). In that sense it is a strategy that is designed to exploit gaps of representation. Emphasizing new or re-vitalizing old conflicts it is rather typical for radical left or radical right parties (that often include some populist features). In other words, while populist parties by and large pursue a strategy that is designed to exploit gaps of representation, radical right and left parties emphasize new or re-vitalize old conflicts. For example, Boris Kollár, leader of *WAF*, acknowledged that *WAF* programme was eclectic: "selecting issues and topics «*per partes*»" (TASR, 2019). In 2018, the key topics presented by the *WAF-BK* in public agenda included agriculture and sufficient production of domestic food (with the aim of self-autarky). In early 2019, the key party agenda according to its leader included protection of borders, protection of traditions and social welfare.<sup>30</sup> However, the main focus of party press releases throughout 2019 was social welfare for women, kids and pensioners (15 press releases/conferences) and agriculture (10 press releases/conferences)<sup>31</sup>. These two issues represented majority of all issues raised by the party throughout 2019 (in addition to discussion in the Parliament or on Facebook). The main issue for the country in early 2020 according to the party leadership was, paradoxically, housing crisis that was not mentioned at all throughout most of 2019 (but it was mention in speeches by Kollár on Facebook/YouTube).<sup>32</sup> Thus, housing crisis (and related suggested public policy) became a top priority on the agenda, including in its 2020 Electoral Manifesto. This electoral manifesto further included free public transport for high school students, right

<sup>30</sup> B. Kollár in *Aktuality nahlas*, 13.05.2019, 18:11, "Sme rodina si extrémistami odpudzuje koalických partnerov" [Sme rodina repulses in cooperation with extremists its potential coalition partners], <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/691646/buduca-koalicia-sa-komplikuje-vacsina-opozicie-odmieta-kollara-kvoli-extremistom-podcast/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://hnutie-smerodina.sk/kategoria/tlacove-vyhlasenia/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://hnutie-smerodina.sk/boris-kollar-zaraza-nas-neschopnost-niektorych-opozicnych-lidrov-pochopit-ariesit-najvacsi-problem-tejto-spolocnosti/>

to a decent standard of living (+200 EUR for each family), cancellation of any fees for medicaments for kids and pensioners (recurring party issue) of amnesty for debtors, an extra 30 eur to pension for mothers for every child raised, right to rent for a car from the state for 100 eur monthly fee, 100 eur annually for all primary school pupils, leveraging income for mothers on maternal leave.<sup>33</sup> From the point of typology, the *WAF* party could be put in between populist and right-wing parties, or, as it was most often defined, right-wing populist party. In contrast, right-wing parties (typically, *LSNS*) that employ populist demagoguery, typically try to emphasize new issues (such as migration, US military bases,) in negative framing or to re-vitalise old conflicts (such as Roma minority or pedophilia). Yet this is just very rough typology, since, for example, Roma issue used to be scapegoat target in the past for *SNS*, *PSNS* as well as for *Smer-SD*, while migrants were useful target for *WAF* around 2015-2016 period.

Indeed, the research suggests that the beneficiaries of voter mobility in 2016 general elections were the new anti-system parties – above all, *WAF* and the *LSNS*. There was clearly present increasing radicalisation of society and significant disillusionment of the public with the mainstream parties (Gyárfášová, Bahna and Slosiarik, 2017, 18). Fundamentally, there was a connection between attitudes to grand corruption and the growing tolerance of radical views in Slovakia. Those who believed that politicians are corrupt were more tolerant of radical activities (Gyárfášová, 2018). Apparently, older and regionally spread finding by Grzymala-Busse (2007) about state exploitation by political parties (in case of Slovakia, tolerated grand corruption and abuse of state authorities for private gains, by political parties) was still relevant here. In case of Slovakia, there was actually little investigated case of partial state capture (Školkay 2018).

### **Is a rise of populist parties accompanied with an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties?**

If we want to answer one of stated initial hypotheses, we have to tackle this issue in more detail. In general, the sociocultural issues in radical right fringe party manifestos do not systematically relate to the changes in main party manifestos regarding those issues. Even if some of the main parties might often agree with the radical right fringe parties, the latter do not directly influence the policy priorities of the main parties (Heinisch, Saxonberg, Werner & Habersack, 2021). One can assume that this was case of Slovakia, too.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://hnutie-smerodina.sk/program/>

First, we have to differentiate conceptually between a political (policy) agenda which is a list of subjects or problems (issues) to which politicians and other stakeholders are paying attention. There are certain political agendas that are quite common across all parties, in all countries: e.g. education, defense, health, or social welfare. Then there is public policy which is seen as a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by, in our case, political party or movement, to solve a central problem as stated by identified political agenda. The quality of both political agenda and public policy is measured by the capacity to create public value (see Mulgan, Breckon, Tarrega, Bakhshi, Davies, Khan and Finnis, 2019). Electoral manifestos should include both relevant political agendas and relevant public policies at a particular point of time in a particular country. We have used assessment of independent experts (some of NGOs cited below, especially INESS, are seen as ideologically biased towards right) and stakeholders (when available) for checking how electoral manifestos present, in that sense, public values and indirectly, new ideas, or whether there is a convergence in ideas and solutions.

First, we used meta-analyses with focus whether populist parties bring new agendas and new policies with public values. Second, we tentatively meta-analysed whether populist parties' either new agendas and/or new suggested policies have been somehow reflected in agendas and policies of the mainstream parties on the example of electoral manifestos. For this finding, we used test of presence of public values. In the last step, it was rather difficult to come to conclusion whether a particular agenda or policy was included when finding inspiration in a particular manifesto of another party. In particular, the most radical and at the same time, by some seen as the most populist, de facto anti-system party *LSNS*, published its electoral manifesto very late, when majority of all other electoral manifestos have been published.

This can be called a meta approach and indirect approach to the research question whether a rise of populist parties is accompanied with an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties. It is justified by the high number of potential populist and non-populist parties in a country, very varied level of complexity of electoral manifestos (ranging from 3 sentences to almost 300 pages) and difficult identification whether a non-populist subject has found inspiration in particular populist party manifesto or other communication, or elsewhere. For example, Schwörer (2019, 19) found strong support for argument that public opinion is the main factor influencing party communication. Furthermore, especially electoral manifestos reflect populist communicative shifts of mainstream parties (Schwörer, 2019, 21).

This methodology was supplemented by additional examples. In fact, probably the only reliable method how to answer the research question correctly would be to get the opinion of insiders – those who participated closely at preparation of electoral manifestos.

**Table 1: Populist and Radical Parties (+ Smer-SD) in Slovakia: their agendas and public policies with estimated public values (2020 Electoral Manifestos)**

Indicator (synchronised on scale 0-100)	Vlast'	LSNS	OLaNO	SNS	Sme rodina	Smer-SD	Source
Education	Not included	Not available	60	20	60	Not available	INESS
Education	Not included	Not available	44	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Education and Labour Market Integration	5	10	30	0	65	0	RUZ
Business Environment and Labour Market	Not included	Not available	60	20	50	Not available	INESS
Rule of Law	7	7	47	27	73	0	RUZ
Public Finances	20	0	60	20	7	0	RUZ
Public Sector Efficiency	Not included	Not available	56	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Ecology	0	0	25	0	75	0	RUZ
Ecology	Not included	Not available	Not available	0	80	Not available	Menej štátu
Ecology - Waste	Not included	0	5	2	9	0	INEKO
Public Finances (0-100 points)	Not included	Not available	40	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Transparency	Not included	Not available	60	Not available	33	Not available	PAS
Anti-corruption	Not included	Not available	44	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Less Bureaucracy	Not included	Not available	32	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Business Environment	Not included	Not available	36	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Support for Business Competition	Not included	Not available	29	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Lower Taxation	Not included	Not available	20	Not available	Not available	Not available	PAS
Research and Innovation	0	0	77	3	33	0	RUZ
Tax Reform	13	7	60	12	20	0	RUZ
Taxation	Not included	0	60	20	40	Not available	INESS
Health Policy	Not included	Not available	62	12	58	0	HPI, INEKO, INESS + 2 individual experts
Agriculture	Not included	Not available	50	30	70	Not available	INESS
Business Environment (Summary)	Not included	3	37	10	21	7	PAS

**Source:** Compiled by author, based on partial assessments done by stakeholders (mainly two associations of entrepreneurs and two NGOs). The numerical date have been adjusted. The lower ranking means qualitatively lower assessment of pledges by parties in their electoral manifestos, as seen by stakeholders and vice versa. Not-available means that party program was not available when evaluation was conducted. Not included means that this item was not included either in party program or party as such was not included into evaluation among those parties that were evaluated by a particular analytical body.

It is difficult to compare all partially, fully or allegedly populist electoral programmes due to missing data. If we focus at the two typical most populist parties (*OLaNO* and *WAF*), these two clearly populist parties produced rather extensive electoral manifestos. This, in itself, suggests that populist parties may be seen as fulfilling “gap of representation” role in political system.

Moreover, we can see that *WAF* was seen as having good program ecology and the rule of law, while *OLaNO* was great in making public pledges for research and innovation. *WAF* was also good in producing pledges in agriculture, education and labour market integration. *OLaNO* was good in pledges related to health policy, tax reform, public finances, transparency and business.

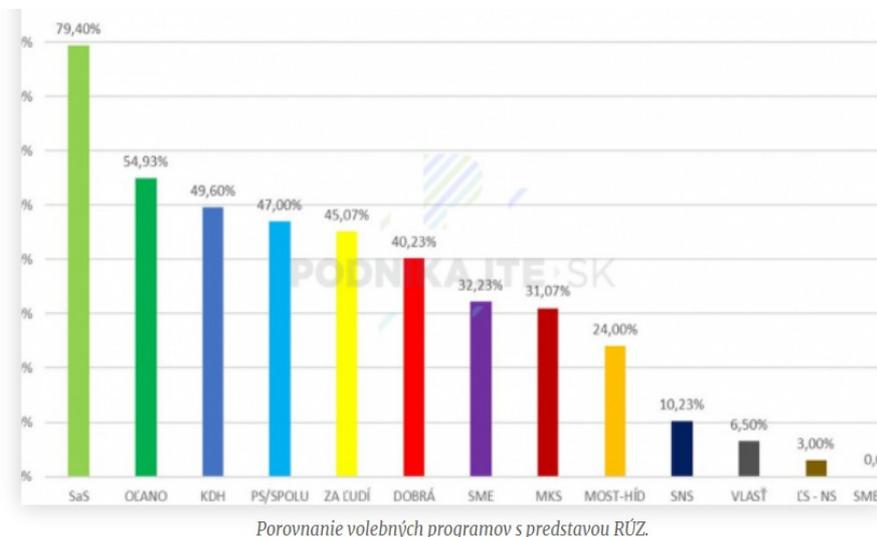
*WAF* was poorly assessed in its pledges on public finances – simply, there were too many promises not covered by available resources – and in business environment.

*OLaNO* was poorly assessed in its pledges in ecology and taxation and not that great in business environment.

Comparatively more interesting is the Table 2a. We can see that according to a major stakeholder - the National Union of Employers (*RUZ*), populist *OLaNO* had actually the second best electoral programme (among evaluated programmes) from its perspective.

*WAF* fared much worse but still much better than radical right-wing parties (*LSNS*, *Vlast*), or two ethnic parties (*MKS*, *Most-Hid*) or transforming *SNS*.

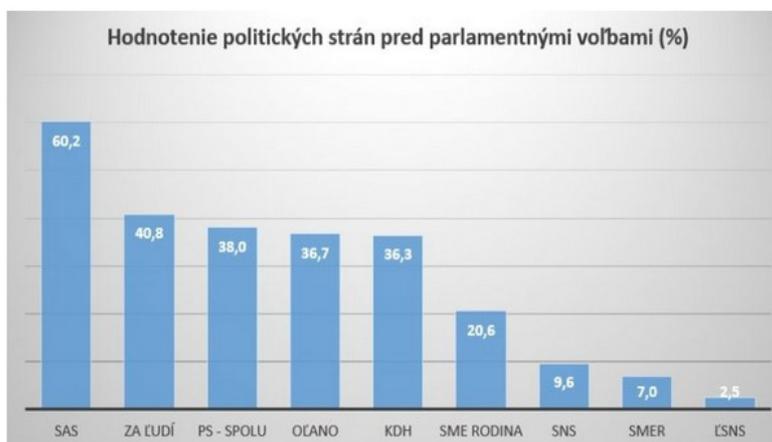
**Table 2a: Populist and Non-Populist Parties’ Policies Compared: General Assessment (RUZ)  
(2020 Electoral Manifestos)**



Source: <https://www.podnikajte.sk/zakonne-povinnosti-podnikateľa/hodnotenie-volebných-programov-2020-ocami-zamestnávateľov>

In Table 2ba we can see that another business association, Association of Entrepreneurs of Slovakia (PAS) assessed *OĽANO*'s program more or less on the same level as programmes of three other non-populist political parties. *WAF* was again put somewhere between non-populist parties and *OĽANO* on the one hand, and radical right-wing party *ĽSNS* on the other hand (with *Smer-SD* and *SNS* being located as a sub-group, between *WAF* and *ĽSNS*).

**Table 2ba: Populist and Non-Populist Parties' Policies Compared: General Assessment (PAS)**



Source: <https://www.alianciapas.sk/2020/02/10/pohľad-pas-na-programy-stran-pred-parlamentnymi-voľbami-vo-februari-2020/>

If we focus at two selected highly relevant policies, health and education, we can see that both *OĽANO* and *WAF* actually presented qualitatively comparable programmes with major non-populist parties, in both policies (Table 2bb and Table 2bc).

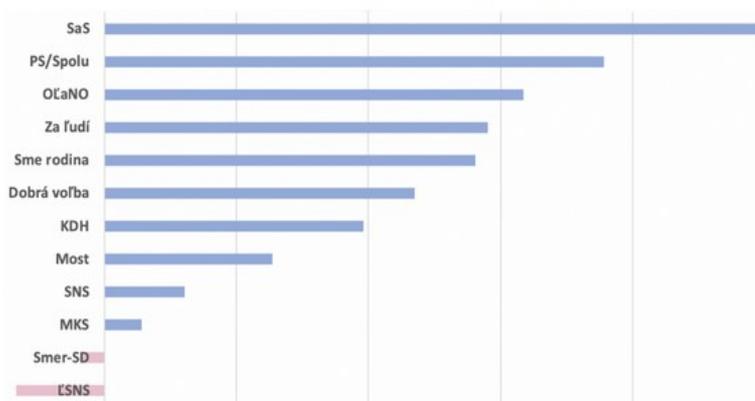
**Table 2bb: Populist and Non-Populist Parties' Policies Compared: Education (INESS) (2020 Electoral Manifestos)**



Source: <https://iness.sk/sk/hodnotenie-volebnych-programov-skolstvo>

**Table 2bc: Populist and Non-Populist Parties' Policies Compared: Health Policies (HPI, INEKO, INESS + 2 individual experts) (2020 Electoral Manifestos)**

Graf: Výsledné hodnotenie zdravotníckych volebných programov



Source: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/hodnotenie-programov-zdravotnictva-sas-zmakla-lsns-prebrala-agendu-smeru>

Furthermore, contrary to the hypothesis, the most “populist” party (which, however, usually does not qualify as a typical populist party but primarily as a far right party), *ĽSNS*, has actually accommodated some of its key radical policy goals (see Řádek, 2019) to policy goals of the mainstream parties (e.g. it preferred 60 years age limit but finally supported proposal for 64 years age limit for granting an old age pension) or to agenda of less populist parties (e.g. it advocated leaving the EU and re-introduction of own currency, while currently it is just fighting against “limiting sovereignty of the EU M.S.”). (Ali, 2021). In part, de-radicalisation of *ĽSNS* was based on experience of its key representatives with ban of their previous

organisation by state authorities (Budajová, 2018). However, in general its policies were seen as unrealistic by experts mainly due to excessive costs associated with its realisation or due to too generally stated policy goals (no specific enough policies). This is in line with Rydgren who has noted (2005, 429): ‘right-wing populism is not contagious (in the sense that epidemics are); it only diffuses if actors want it to diffuse’. If there are no actors (i.e. parties) or channels (i.e. the media) to diffuse right-wing populist agenda items, they are less likely to spread and become normalized.’ Moreover, right-wing populists have a negative effect on democratic quality when they are in government. However, indirect effects caused by populists’ electoral successes are rare, concluded Rydgren. This is, actually, the case of *LSNS*.

In general, comparison of electoral manifestos of the most relevant political parties suggests that in majority of their electoral manifestos there was actually a huge divergence in policies (rather than in agendas) in comparison with radical right-wing and radical left wing parties. However, two typical populist parties, already present in the Parliament, populist *OLaNO* and right-wing populist *WEF*, had usually rather reasonable policy agendas and policies, quite often on average level when compared with mainstream parties, and sometimes even put qualitatively (public value aspect) at the top level by experts or stakeholders. Only occasionally these agendas and policy proposals either by *OLaNO* or *WAF* were seen negatively by cited experts and stakeholders (thus, having low public value). Moreover, *Smer-SD*, the mainstream left-wing party (by some seen as populist, at least to a certain degree or occasionally) produced electoral manifesto for 2020 general elections with just three points of which only one was sufficiently specific. Thus, its populism level could be evaluated only in its rhetoric during election campaigning or based on its past policies.

There is some support for thesis of diffusion of some populist ideas in policy agendas of two parties, *Smer-SD* and *SNS* (mutual competition), seen by some as the mainstream parties (although occasionally nationalist as well as anti-immigrant, and partially anti-Roma, in both cases), while by others seen as being populist parties. Anyway, this was rather limited diffusion, and especially executed during the last weeks in power, shortly before the general elections in February 2020. Thus, it could be seen as part of political marketing rather than typical example of policy diffusion. This policy proposal included 13<sup>th</sup> pension (supported by *Smer-SD*, *SNS*, *LSNS*, and *Sme rodina*) ([Folentová](#) and [Barčíková](#), 2020).

It is again questionable how to analyse anti-immigration stances of almost all political parties. First, common anti-immigrant position does not reflect nuances present. In any case, was there impact of even more radical and permanently negative policy and rhetorical approach towards foreigners, by ĽSNS, and partly by both Smer-SD and SNS? Or was it that mainstream political parties rather reflected opinion of population at large and/or authentic and realistic („Real-politik“) negative positions of majority of parties (the only exception was *Most-Híd*) in reaction to ongoing (exaggerated) crisis and – again – during pre-election period?

It is also questionable how to assess qualitatively and quantitatively diffusion of populist agendas in policy process during coalition government with one or two partially (or occasionally) populist parties (*SNS* and *Smer-SD*), and with one coalition non-populist party (*Most-Híd*) during 2016-2020 period. Undoubtedly, there was some diffusion of populist ideas into governmental agenda (e.g. an update in legislation indirectly aiming against new religious communities to be established in the country). This idea was proposed by *SNS* and approved by the Parliament. However, many other ideas did not get through either the Coalition Council, the Cabinet or the Parliament, or have been substantially changed when compared with original proposal (Školkay, 2020).

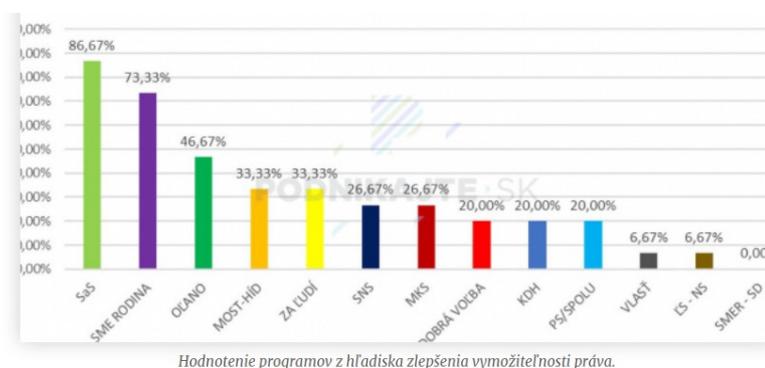
Some convergence of populist policy ideas rather than diffusion of these ideas (and as different from divergence), between populist/far-right and centre-right, *ĽSNS* and *WAF*, respectively. on the one hand, and more mainstream parties on the other hand, can be seen in case of centre-left *Smer-SD* and centre-right *SNS* (64 years age limit for pensions, although *ĽSNS* preferred 60 years age limit) and then there was consensus for 100% level of maternal support between *ĽSNS* and *Smer-SD*, and partially with *Sme rodina* (maternal support at the level of minimum salary).<sup>34</sup>

There was opposite convergence in health policy among *Smer-SD* and *ĽSNS*, when the later seemed to put the former's policy ideas into extreme (Ali, 2021). These two parties had the worst health policy programmes, according to cited experts and NGOs. Surprisingly, as already mentioned, both populist movements *OLaNO* and *WAF* had health policies at a very good quality level, clearly comparable with standard non-populist parties *PS/Spolu* and *Za ľudí*. Thus, it can be hardly identifiable who influenced whom. In any case, it does not matter from the point of our research question – there was little populism in policy proposals of both populist parties in their health programmes. In other words, populist parties can have quite

<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/hodnotenie-programov-zdravotnictva-sas-zmakla-lsns-prebrala-agendu-smeru>, <https://www.finreport.sk/lidri/lSNS-je-zmierlivejsia-voci-eu-odchod-z-nato-z-programu-nevypustila/>

reasonable some policy agendas and policies. On the one hand, there is a great degree of convergence among majority of standard/mainstream new or old parties in their programmes at a general level. Surprisingly, some populist parties (*OLaNO*, usually also *WAF*) had quite acceptable policy agendas according to local analysts. On the other hand, occasionally (*WAF*) and more often centre-right (*SNS*) and typically radical right-wing parties (*Vlast'*, *LSNS*), but also some left-wing radical parties (*socialisti.sk*), presented rather radical policy agendas that were seen as different from the mainstream parties. Thus, if there was any inspiration in agenda of populist and radical parties, there were different policies (practical solutions) suggested by the mainstream parties. Three heavy and little populist parties respectively: *Smer-SD*, *LSNS*, *Vlast'* were seen by employers' association as having most negative policy goals in the area of the rule of law. Surprisingly, heavily populist movement *WAF* was seen as having second best programme in this area, above average of other standard political parties.

**Table 3: The Rule of Law in Electoral Manifestos**



Source: <https://www.podnikajte.sk/zakonne-povinnosti-podnikateľa/hodnotenie-volebných-programov-2020-ocami-zamestnavateľov>

- Four heavy and (again) populist parties respectively: *Smer-SD*, *LSNS*, *Vlast'* and *SNS* were seen by employers' association as having the most negative policy goals in the area of **connecting education with work**.

- Five heavy and (again) little populist parties respectively: *Smer-SD*, *LSNS*, *Smerodina*, *Vlast'* and *SNS* were seen employers' association as having most negative policy goals from the perspective of **viable state budget**. However, *OLaNO* movement fared above average in this indicator. Thus, apparently, populism is not necessarily representing just excessive spending. It is more about being radical anti-democratic alternative, or about radicalised standard parties. However, there is a caveat – some radical parties were never in government (such as *Vlast'* and *LSNS*) and they probably did not expect to fulfill their promises fully (such as *LSNS*), while others had experience with rather moderate economic policies save for pre-election and election periods (*Smer-SD*, *SNS*). Moreover, when *WAF* entered the government for the first time in 2020, it took a more realistic approach compared to its original electoral pledges.
- For **applied research and innovation**, one populist anti-corruption and anti-establishment movement, *OLaNO*, was the best achiever, while *Vlast'*, *Smer-SD*, *LSNS*, *MKS*, *SNS*, *Most-Hid* fared poorly here. *WAF* achieved actually comparatively average results, locating it among standard political parties within this indicator. This suggests that populist movements can be open to innovation, although this is probably rather exception than rule. Furthermore, this finding suggests not that much surprising idea that local populist parties that are more anti-system (a radical, although not openly acknowledged alternative to democracy, such as *Vlast'* and *LSNS*) are usually rather less open-minded.

### **Does a rise of populist parties make party systems more acutely polarized?**

Deegan-Krause (2013) argued that in the 1990s Slovak party system already differed from that of its nearer neighbours, in the dimensions and polarization of its party competition and the legitimacy of the party system as a whole. In other words, a significant but not majority share of Slovakia's population did not respond to programmatic incentives but responded to charismatic or clientelistic incentives. There was polarisation of party system into two blocs – one authoritarian populist-nationalistic around *HZDS* (or pro-Mečiar – former P.M. in the 1990s), and one democratic around liberals, Christians, ethnic Hungarians and leftists (or anti-Mečiar). It was a type of multiparty, “quasi-two bloc pluralism“ (Leška, 2013). The 1998–2002 period was the key period of fluidity of Slovak politics (Haughton, 2014). Yet *Smer* responded to the disappointing results in 2002 elections with a strategy of intensive

party-building efforts (Haughton, 2014). This choice possibly contributed to the *(re)stabilization* path in which turnover among political parties stopped and new parties survived until 2006 elections. Yet political party system after 2006 showed the *full-turnover* path with new parties emerging to supplant old ones (Haughton, 2015). In 2020, Smer-SD was the most senior party in the Slovak parliament, with all the other parties having been established during the ‘era of Robert Fico’ (Marušiak, 2021, 53).

Thus, it is not so much a rise of populist political parties that makes party system more acutely polarised but rather systematic issues in governance of a country. In fact, it can be little populist coalition in power that, however, does not guarantee fair and just legal and administrative system that leads to rise of even more radical right wing alternatives. The second issue that impacts many citizens negatively are relative but rising differences in standards of living, or relative poverty.

Populist parties do not necessarily represent just bad or negative policy solutions on the whole. Populist parties may allow selection of rather good candidates for public jobs in critical public areas such as justice or police or prosecutors. However, the follow up, radical right wing parties – such as *LSNS* – do not seem to contribute very positive to policy solutions.

**Do populist parties enter governing coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if the latter also employ at least one of the typical themes of populist discourse, e.g., nationalist, nativist, ant-establishment, Eurosceptic themes?**

Populist parties can enter into coalition with non-populist parties. But there is something fundamentally wrong with our understanding or measuring populism. The already discussed POPPA prefers an ideational approach to populism that can be operationalized with five separate items: “Manichean worldview,” “indivisible people,” “general will,” “people-centrism,” and “anti-elitism.” (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021). However, we used extended assessment used by the POPPA that included more populist indicators. Ideational approach based only on five key indicators did not work, or worked only partially, as we shall see. The extended set of indicators proved to be a better reflection of actual level of populism among political parties. We included in the following Table 4 all political parties mentioned into the POPPA List. This list actually includes also typical non-populist or little populist parties. What does it tell us about populist political parties in Slovakia?

**TABLE 4: Populism Among Parties in Slovakia (POPPA List, party means)**

	Smer-SD	OLaNO	SNS	LSNS	Most-Híd	SaS	Sme rodina	KDH	Spolu	PS
Five indicators score (Complex)	5,4	2,2	3,6	0,5	7,7	3,5	1,1	6	7,87	8,4
Multi-dimensional score	3,96	7	4,43	9,2	0,33	3,3	7,8	2,97	0,29	0

Surprisingly, clearly non-populist parties scored high on key five populist indicators, but low on more comprehensive set of the POPPA indicators. Conversely, clearly populist parties scored low on key five populist indicators, but low on more comprehensive set of the POPPA indicators.

It should be mentioned that all parties that scored high at five indicators but low on a multi-dimensional populist assessment (*Most-Híd*, *KDH*, *Spolu* and *PS*), did not get into the Parliament in 2020 general elections. It is true that the last three parties missed the Parliament only very narrowly.

On the contrary, those political parties that scored high on a multi-dimensional populist assessment (*OLaNO*, *WAF*, *LSNS*) and low on five key populist indicators, succeeded in general elections. The exception was, actually, *Smer-SD*, that seemed to be at an average score in both indicators and managed to pass into the Parliament but with less spectacular voting results than previously.

Similarly, *SNS* failed in elections, and at the same time it did not show substantial difference between five indicators and multidimensional scheme.

Surprisingly, five key populism indicators seem to be in effect, misleading, analytically – one really needs multidimensional approach for understanding populism. The multidimensional scheme included, for example, issues like immigration, EU, law and order, nativism, and lifestyle. In other words, it appears that what matters for voters is not that much typical populist appeal as used at an abstract level (“Manichean worldview,” “indivisible people,” “general will,” “people-centrism,” and “anti-elitism), but, rather very transparent, clearly stated, simple, and radical (in a sense, different from the mainstream at least in their rhetorical dimension) party opinions on *certain* topical political issues. We have to highlight “certain” or “selected” issues here, since, as we have already show, the 2020 electoral programmes of the most typical (conceptually)<sup>35</sup> populist party (*OLaNO*) this “selected” issue was actually grand

<sup>35</sup> OLaNO candidates for MPs consist of heterogeneous candidates with heterogeneous preferences (save for anti-corruption fight). There was no party membership except 4 founding members for a long time, until it

corruption – state capture. However, this was different state capture as understood in recent literature<sup>36</sup> (e.g. cited in Dimitrova, 2018) – it was rather high levels of particularism or patronage (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015), presented in a partial state capture.

### **Populist Parties and the Party System**

**What type of party system exists in the country in question? Did it change after the rise of populist parties? If yes, did that change affect its better or worse functioning?**

If the key element of polarized pluralism is the phenomenon of anti-system parties, these are de facto present in Slovakia (*ĽSNS* and some other niche parties). Moreover, Slovak party system is in line with majority of Sartori's eight indicators ( 1) presence of relevant anti-system parties, 2) existence of opposition parties at each end of the ideological spectrum (bilateral oppositions), 3) a central ideological position occupied by one party or a group of parties, 4) high polarization (ideological distance between parties), 5) prevalence of centrifugal drivers over centripetal ones, 6) ideological patterning, 7) presence of irresponsible opposition, 8) a politics in which parties attempt to outbid each other in pursuit of voters' favor).

However parties in Slovakia (and in general) are by definition not anti-system parties from a legal point of view. For example, a proposal filed by the prosecutor general to ban *ĽSNS* - that is often put into this category – was dismissed by the Supreme Court in 2019 (4Volpp/1/2017). At the same time, the chairman of *ĽSNS* was sentenced to jail (subject to appeal) for promoting fascist symbols and other behaviour supporting anti-democratic forces in 2020 (see, e.g. Kysel', 2020).

In general, Sartori's typology seems to be useful only partially (Fiala and Strmiska, 1998, 149-166). For example, what does it mean “irresponsible opposition” is very much matter of personal opinion.

There is a polarized pluralism, but it has little to do with populist parties. At the same time, it is true that – paradoxically – (de facto) anti-system party *ĽSNS* is seen as the most populist party in Slovakia. However, as mentioned, this is not purely or conceptually typical populist party but rather a party with clear right-wing ideology using demagoguery.

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was forced to expand its membership basis by law.

<sup>36</sup> Building on these insights and the work by Vachudova (2015) and Innes (2014), and based on the character of the dominant rent seeking coalition, distinguishing between: (1) a network-type dominant coalition, consisting of businessmen and politicians formally belonging to different parties or with connections to several political forces; and (2) an ideological party-type dominant coalition consisting of politicians from one political party in power and associated businessmen.

This brings us back to question what is key to understanding of populism empirically? Is it just rhetoric? Is it policy? Is it political or electoral manifesto? Or all combined? We can have parties that employ populist rhetoric during election campaign, or when in opposition, but not necessarily in majority of policy making such as *Smer-SD*, partly also *SNS*. Moreover, in either case, we can have political manifestos that can be seen as populist (promising excessive pledges without financial viability such as in case of *WAF* 2020 Manifesto), but there are also other aspects of electoral manifestos of populist parties that are actually valued quite positively by major stakeholders and analysts (*WAF*, *OLaNO*).

There should be established some threshold to allow for reliable assessment.

If we follow typology as suggested by Wolinetz (2004), then Slovakia probably represents extended multipartyism with moderate degree of polarisation and three-polar form of competition. It should be explained here that Wolinetz does not recognise “three-polar” form of competition. However, by three polar competition we mean three different political camps : standard parties, populist parties and radical de facto anti-system parties (e.g. *ĽSNS*).

Additionally, we can establish four polar form of competition division based on a) by and large non-populist parties, b) parties with populist rhetoric and more or less identifiable ideology, c) populist parties, and d) borderline cases (see Chart 1).

This discussion is related to Zulianello’s concept who defines anti-system party as such that rejects established metapolicies and also is not integrated into the system. It is not clear what is meant by metapolicies, and it is not clear how to evaluate de facto anti-system party that is in the Parliament. Is such party integrated or not into the system? Normally, anti-system party would not be allowed to be present in the Parliament in a standard liberal democracy.

Also, if we accept that a party that rejects established metapolicies and is integrated into the system is a “halfway house party”, then certainly populist parties *OLaNO* and *WAF* as well as anti-system party *ĽSNS* are “halfway house parties. However, how do we tackle analytically a situation when established “metapolicies” actually include grand corruption and partial or full state capture? In that case rejection of such “metapolicies” should be seen normatively positively, as well as lower integration into “the (corrupt) system”.

Moreover, to define it more precisely, one would need to know what is meant by “multipartyism” (How many parties? Sartori mentioned 5-6, but we can have party system like in Poland, with maybe dozens election parties present in the Parliament which is qualitatively different pluralism). How to calculate election parties? Sartori suggested to consider “major” parties). Also, what does a “moderate” degree mean? What is meant by “irresponsible” opposition?

Yet there is difference among populist parties and radical parties here. While the former seem to present new niche and/or salient issues (such as housing crisis), the former is more focused at traditional issues or revitalised old issues (such as migration, pedophilia). There is a populist party *WAF* that can be located in that sense between valence populist *OLaNO* and radical right *LSNS*.

To the last question - whether these changes in political party system, and especially the rise of populist parties have affected better or worse functioning of political system. If seen from perspective of the 2020 year, on the one hand, there was a huge change with respect to the rule of law at the general level, effectively ending partial state capture. On the other hand, the populist-lead government passed some measures that were seen as questionable by legal experts. Also the population at large was highly disappointed with the performance of the government, mainly influenced with inconsistent and chaotic handling of pandemic and secondarily by confrontational style of the Prime Minister.

## **Conclusion**

The Slovak political party system has fundamentally changed if one compares parties present then (2002) and now (2020) in the Parliament and government, and at the same time, from point of view of success of populist parties, it remained the same, over the last 20 years. The support for populist parties has remained constant (if we focus at general elections results). The only change is that the number of voters who supported parties with identifiable ideology and using populist rhetoric has doubled, while support for borderline cases (parties difficult to include among suggested three major categories) has decreased. In that sense ideologically backed polarisation has increased. It was facilitated by EU membership, and especially for *Smer-SD*, by its membership among *Party of European Socialists*. This is ambiguous development – it can be welcome in case of *Smer-SD*, with dominant social democracy features, but it is less welcome for *LSNS*, with proto-fascist features and rhetoric (although decreasing while in Parliament). Actually, it appears that the European Parliament may have softening effect even on radicals, when both MEPs for this party are barely two years after European elections in conflict with the party that nominated them, and no longer representing that party (it is difficult to separate other, internal factors, here, though).

If one goes even further back, it can be argued that “quasi-two bloc pluralism“ that was typical for Slovakia for much of late 1990s (Mečiar versus anti-Mečiar, or authoritarian leader-lead society versus liberal democracy) and very early 2000s, emerged again after the 2010 general elections, if not already after the 2006

general elections (this time as Fico versus anti-Fico, or partially captured state versus fair and just state). This time it was *Smer-SD* that was more or less blacklisted (and that limited its selection of coalition partners). After the 2016 elections, in addition, *Kotlebovci-LSNS* joined the Parliament and remained ostracised (in that sense, there was a “three-block empirical or practical party pluralism”). For example, coalition government after the 2016 general elections was defined by decision of *SNS* to join one or another bloc of parties (when all, including *SNS*, excluded *LSNS*).

In all cases, periods or blocks, as put by Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009, 838), Slovakia exhibits a long-term “clean–corrupt” issue divide. This is, in essence, typical substance of populism. Concurrently, it also indicates problems with country governance at different levels that as boomerang lead back to re-emergence of new populist saviours. However, at the political party level, the electoral system seems to be a major obstacle in development of more ideologically and less leader-based party system. New party challengers often exploit some niche and salient issues, of which the most durable was grand corruption or, more precisely, partially captured state. It is interesting to note that this issue was very little explored by local and international scientists.

*Smer-SD* was the only one party that existed back then in 2002, that was in the Parliament after 2020 general elections. Moreover, this party has shifted from populism through social democracy back to soft version of populism (once it lost power or it was losing power, being sensitive towards internal and external political and social developments). However, it is still primarily a social democracy, moving to becoming a possible borderline case.

There are again two strongly populist parties – *OLaNO* and *WAF* – present in the Parliament. However, these parties do not seem to represent such (immediate) threat to “established metapolicies” (if understood as the rule of law and democracy) as one could assume. On the contrary, these two populist parties allowed the police, prosecutors and courts to operate freely, thus revealing shocking scope of captured state that was established under previous government by relatively “standard” social democracy and its coalition partners. Moreover, although there was a fair criticism of populist parties’ approach to the rule of law (mainly related to ad hoc measures related to pandemic, see Rule of Law Initiative<sup>37</sup> and two protests by prosecutor general<sup>38</sup>, as well as interview with Kollár, MP)<sup>39</sup>, their overall approach

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.pravnystat.sk/dokumenty>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.genpro.gov.sk/protesty-prokuratora-3acb.html>

<sup>39</sup> Mikušovič, Dušan. 2021. “Miroslav Kollár zo Za ľudí: Robert Fico len so závisťou pozerá, čo všetko si my dovoľíme.” *Denník N*, January 15, 2021. <https://dennikn.sk/2226836/miroslav-kollar-zo-za-ludi-robert-fico-len-so-zavistou-pozera-co-vsetko-si-my-dovolime/>.

towards policies in many areas was assessed mostly positively in their electoral manifestos. However, once in government, just after less than a year, the P.M. Matovič was assessed in public opinion poll rather negatively (60% “bad” or as “rather bad” P.M.), while the government had 69% lack of trust (“rather” and “fully” distrust) (Median, 2021)<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, *OLaNO* went down to 15% in popularity (Median, 2021) or to 10% in popularity, and *WAF* to 5% (Focus, 2021)<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, there was also seen a potential threat of authoritarianism to flourish under a populist leader (see Zala, 2021). Thus, performance of populist-led government in its first year could be seen as ambiguous, and probably much influenced by the pandemic.

Now we come back to research hypotheses stated earlier. It should be mentioned that we could verify these hypotheses only with limited validity since we would need to use more and better data, as well as more space and time, to arrive to fully reliable conclusions.

Representation gap hypothesis (populist parties pursue a strategy that is designed to exploit gaps of representation by means of emphasizing new or re-vitalizing old conflicts) seems to be more adapt to radical right wing (or left wing) parties that use populist demagoguery. However, a modified Representation gap hypothesis can be applied to populist parties. They seem to exploit gaps of representation, essentially, insufficient fight against grand corruption and partially captured state (*OLaNO*) and some niche and/or salient topics such as housing crisis or executions among population, or, indeed, migration crisis (*WAF*). For the last issue, *LSNS* seemed to be more successful in raising this, by and large, in local conditions politically abused topic in 2015. Moreover, populist parties seem to be able to represent some ideas in some areas in more attractive way than standard parties, for some major stakeholders and analysts, as we could see in evaluation of their electoral manifestos.

Contagion hypothesis (the rise of populist parties is accompanied with an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties) has not been confirmed. There was only minor overlap of ideas and policies of non-populist and populist parties that were in government during 2016-2020 period, or if comparing their electoral manifestos. Rather, radical right wing party (*Kotlebovci-LSNS*) seemed to accommodate its ideas to mainstream

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<sup>40</sup> MEDIAN. 2021. “Volebný model a potenciál politických strán.” Median, January 15, 2021. [https://www.median.sk/pdf/OSTATNE/4520585\\_RTVS\\_Volebnymodel\\_a\\_aktualnetemy\\_v23.pdf](https://www.median.sk/pdf/OSTATNE/4520585_RTVS_Volebnymodel_a_aktualnetemy_v23.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> <https://volby.sme.sk/pref/1/politicke-strany/p/focus>

parties and to the mainstream discourse. In some cases, *Smer-SD* adopted some populist ideas (e.g. anti-migration rhetoric during 2015-2016 period, and then again some populist policy measures and rhetoric especially shortly before general elections in early 2016 or in early 2020). However, there is no consensus among analysts whether *Smer-SD* is a populist or primarily non-populist party. Marušiak (2021) argues that in this case there is a process of reversibility of mainstreamisation and at least partial return to populism. In general, coalition form of government reduces ability of populist parties to pursue some of their rather excessive pledges (the case of *WAF*).

Polarisation hypothesis (the rise of populist parties makes party systems more acutely polarised) and elective affinity coalition hypothesis (populist parties enter governing coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if the later also employ at least one of the typical themes of populist discourse, e.g., nationalist, nativist, ant-establishment, Eurosceptic themes) seem to be related. For the former, if populist parties are able to form a coalition (be that with other populist or non-populist parties), this means that there is present polarisation among “standard” parties. However, normatively, it must be seen very strange that non-populist parties enter into coalition with populist parties. It is even more surprising if the non-populist parties such as *Most-Híd* (without employing any typical theme of populist discourse) entered in coalition with partially or little populist parties such as *Smer-SD* or *SNS* (2016-2020). The explanation is that this was more result of (lack of) available alternatives rather than “affinity”. Similarly, coalition of *Smer-SD*, *ĽS-HZDS* and *SNS* (Fico I government, 2006-2010, but also Fico III. government) could be at least in part be seen as result of available coalition options rather than “affinity”. However, at the level of voters’ preferences among these parties, there was affinity. For the latter part of hypothesis (populist parties enter governing coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if the later also employ at least one of the typical themes of populist discourse, e.g., nationalist, nativist, ant-establishment, Eurosceptic themes), this is only partially true. *SaS* with Eurosceptic themes and anti-immigration positions entered in coalition with two populist parties and one non-populist party in 2020. Vice-versa, non-populist *Za ľudí* entered into coalition with (partially liberal- populist) *SaS* and two populist parties. However, again, this was rather result of available alternatives rather than affinity or polarisation hypothesis as defined earlier. In other words, the rise of populist parties did not make party systems more acutely polarised - there was already polarisation present. Maybe this hypothesis can be accepted in a sense that these two populist parties resolutely rejected any coalition with *Smer-*

*SD* as well as *LSNS*. The first party was seen by both populist parties as corrupt, while the second party was seen as having proto-fascist, anti-democratic features.

The (theoretical) polarized quasi-four bloc pluralism: (a) *by and large non-populist parties*, b) *parties with populist rhetoric and more or less identifiable ideology*, c) *populist parties*, and d) *borderline cases*) that emerged again after the 2020 general elections was not caused by the existence of populist parties. In fact, majority of relevant parties that run in 2020 general elections was hesitant to form government with a “standard” social democracy after the 2020 elections. Instead, the two *by and large non-populist parties* – *SaS* and especially *Za ľudí*, preferred to join clearly populist parties rather than social democracy that allowed and tolerated partial state capture. This was a compromise on all sides – populists softened their rhetoric, abandoned some of their excessive pledges, and non-populist parties preferred rather them than social democracy that tolerated partially captured state that, in effect, paved the way not only to populists, but also in the long run, to their more radical alternatives (*Kotlebovci-LSNS*, *Vlast*). Thus, *by and large non-populist parties* were able to form a coalition with populist parties. Yet this had consequences for *Smer-SD* – party with populist rhetoric and more or less identifiable ideology (and moving towards becoming a borderline case). While such parochial version of social democracy (socially conservative, radical in anti-rhetoric – against migrants, liberals, etc) remained in *Smer-SD*, more liberal wing created a new *Hlas – sociálna demokracia* that seemed to attract majority of former supporters of *Smer-SD* as well as many voters who were dissatisfied with the governing coalition. In a sense, this reminds of situation more than 20 years ago, when then young leader R.Fico left *SDL* and established *Smer*.

All in all, these developments have in common relatively poor management of the country at least in certain sectors or impacting certain segments of population by non-populist parties (or their predecessors, other populist parties). As put bluntly by Ján Budaj, former dissident and minister of environment in Matovič’s government: “Polite, so called standard political culture has produced three waves of thieves – under Mečiar, Dzurinda and Fico” (in Bán, 2020).

Finally, a note should be mentioned about measuring and assessing populism. Using only TAPI index would lead us to rather different conclusions. As we have seen, there is an overall progress in approaches used for such purposes, with new, better calibrated tools (indices)

being developed. *POPPA* index seems to be the best available, although still imperfect. It is imperfect conceptually. It includes not only populist parties, but also parties with specific ideology that just use populist demagoguery such as *Kotlebovci-ĽSNS*. It is imperfect analytically. There are items that are questionable if decontextualised (e.g. Euroscepticism as such may have nothing to do with populism, it can be perfectly legitimate criticism), or during evaluation phase (e.g. migration policy needs an expert in that field, otherwise it will be very much based on media reporting). Moreover, populist features (rhetoric), agendas (party or electoral manifestos) and policies are evolving over time (as documented by Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009), and may be mutually (more or less) contradictory. A populist party may change its rhetoric rapidly depending whether it is in government or in opposition. Yet previous rhetoric and especially policies may be little or no populist. Furthermore, electoral manifestos may be seen in many parts as quite acceptable by major stakeholders and independent analysts. All this should be considered when designing or using populism indices and measuring populism.

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# **Attachment 1 – A Study by a Local Senior PhD Researcher**

## **The Impact of Populism on the Party System 2000–20 in Slovak republic**

### **Introduction**

Populism should be a direct reaction on the crisis of liberal democracy and the structural change in the society, when those that were not politically active started to be engaged into the political sphere and started to favor those political subjects that are communicating easy and basic slogans that are understandable and simple when it comes on their level of realization. Nevertheless, to recognize good and bad populism in these times is even more unable as to recognize who is and who is not using populist rhetoric.

The aim of this chapter is to focus on the position of Slovak populist political parties, their ability to influence other mainstream political parties, directly or indirectly by their presence in the parliament or government. Our intention is to show how deep, right now, is the populism rooted in the party system, and that the dominant presence of populism in the past has not a great impact as it is in these days with less votes shared. We believe that is a natural development of their ability to infect mainstream politics to use and abuse populism as a tool for gaining more power.

### **Political Context**

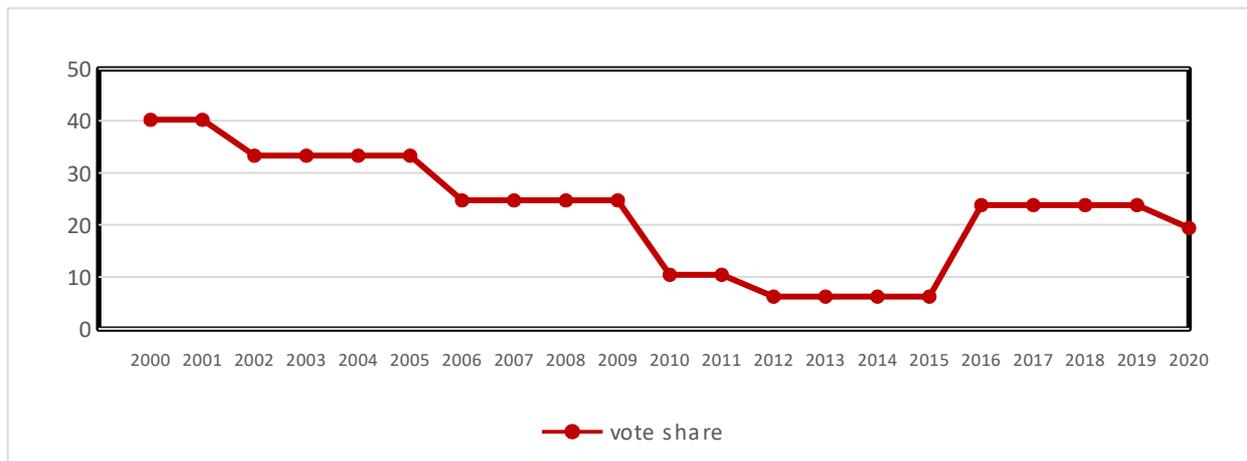
Transformation period of Slovak republic was long and had devastating impact on the political relations and voter's behavior in future years and we believe that this is holding till now. The rise of populist political parties was accompanied by the rise of authoritarian and nationalist tendencies, visible dominantly in the Central European region, and Slovakia was not the exception, rather the "rule". We can trace the roots of these tendencies back to the Velvet revolution and emancipation of Slovak nationalism in following years, and the establishment of Slovak republic by dissolving with the Czechs.

The first period of populist government with authoritarian exposure was manifested in between the years 1993 – 1998 (governments of Vladimir Mečiar). The second period was in between the period 2006 – 2010, and the last was after the election in 2016. But in general, we must state that the populist political parties could be displayed as the essence of political system in Slovakia from 1992, and remain as their integral part for decades. And yes, populist parties in Slovakia were those which have the ability to form coalition from the 1992, as in 1994, 2006, 2010 and 2016, and we believed that they again formed the new government after 2020, despite the fact that many foreign analysts say something different. We also believed that the populist element in Slovak republic survives and creates its ties differently than in other parts of Western European countries, and this is why it is hard to track from outside if you do not have the wisdom of the political culture and Slovak society.

The first integral logic that should be characterized by the populist political parties in Slovakia is their ability to stand against any regime or any government in the period of systematic changes and reform periods. The absence of any national consensus in transformation times gave to the populist's power not only to survive but to form a government after these periods of reform changes (Mesežnikov, 2007, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Olga Gyárfášová, Martin Bútor, and Miroslav Kollár, 2008).

### **Figure 01. Populism vote share in Slovakia between 2000 – 2020**

**Source:** TAP Index



According various Slovak analysts and political scientists we can distinguish between two types of populism in the whole history of political and party system in Slovakia. The first group, or even better say first generation of populist are defined as those who are so called the hard-liners, that have the tendencies to mixed up the populism and authoritarian tendencies together. These populists were visible in the first transformative period in Slovakia and remain till the end of the European integration processes. The second so called type, generation of populist so called the soft-liners were active in the period in between 1998 – 2002 when the integration process to various international and European organizations and formation took placed (Mesežnikov, 2007, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Oľga Gyárfášová, Martin Bútora, and Miroslav Kollár, 2008).

**Figure 02. Populists in government in Slovakia between 2000 – 2018 according to TAPI Index**



**Source:** TAP Index

To recognize the uniqueness of party system in general and the position of populist political parties within we must put together various indexes worldwide and national characteristic found in the analyses of specifics national party system to get the full picture. Even though this chapter, as whole this report based on the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index, we need to state that it have its limits and barriers that are not able to cover all the varieties of populist parties case by case, as in the Slovakia example. If you just compare the results of two different data gathering about the position of populism in Slovak national context you see the dramatic differences. For example, the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index (see Figure NO2) suggested that in between 2000 – 2020 there were 2 populist political parties in the governments 2006 – 2009 and 2016 – 2019. But according to the Blair institute that monitor “Populism in power” suggested that between the monitored period between 1990 – 2020 in Slovakia four populist government were present (see the Table NO1).

**Table 01. Populist in government in Slovakia between 1990 – 2020 according to Tony Blair Institute**

Number	Leader or Party	Years in Office	Type of Populism
01	Vladimír Mečiar	1993-1994	Cultural <sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> “Cultural populism claims that the true people are the native members of the nation-state, and outsiders can include immigrants, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities, and cosmopolitan elites. Populists argue that these groups pose a threat to ‘the people’ by not sharing their values. Cultural populists tend to emphasise religious traditionalism, law and order, anti-immigration positions, and national sovereignty.” Kyle, Jordan and Meyer Brett, High Tide? Populism in Power, 1990 – 2020. February, 2020, available online at <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-02/High%20Tide%20Populism%20in%20Power%201990->

02	Vladimír Mečiar	1994-1998	Cultural
03	Robert Fico	2006-2010	Cultural
04	Robert Fico	2012-2018	Cultural

Source: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

The main difference between these two results is the fact, that TAP Index do not define political party Smer-SD (social democrats) as a populist political party. Which, we believe that is assumption is incorrect and our statements is proved by dozen and dozens of articles and surveys focus on the position and performance of Smer-SD (Mesežnikov, 2007; Pappas and Kriesi, 2015; Szomolány and Gál, 2016; Adam, 2017; Stanley, 2017; Berman and Snegovaya, 2019).

Also, we see problem in the definition of the populism according to the TAP index and their problem to recognize the specific modes of populism in our region, which is influenced by their national data provided from national coordinator. And finally, the TAP index and even not only the Tony Blair Institute do not recognize the latest party flux in Slovakia party system after the parliamentary election in 2020 and their impact of the populist political parties. We believed that actual data do not showed the real performance of populist political parties, and we may be witnesses of a mainstream backlash and rise of populist and authoritarian leaders, subjects, that are gaining with the pandemic crisis.

### **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

In general, the traditional areas in political agenda of Slovak populist are displayed through the basic division of “us” vs. “them”, which could be divided into two main subcategories. In the first cleavages, the populists are operating with ethnic minority issues, and the basic division “us” vs. “them”. All populist political parties in this political agenda tried to polarize the discourse within two camps, to those who are representants or members of minorities (Czech, Roma, Hungarians, Jews, migrants, and refugees) and those we are in the majority (Slovaks, “true Slovaks”). This political discourse based on ethnicity or basic “otherness” is referring to “us” and “them” (others), it denies the principle of citizenship, and see other societal groups as second order-citizens that are not loyal enough towards the Slovak culture and nation.

This “ethnicization” had various forms in the past and various populists used it with favor. It could be traced back to the first Slovak government under Vladimir Mečiar with his anti-Hungarian, anti-Czechian and anti-European attitudes, that were overlapping by anti-liberal issues. The same political agenda was colonized by the Slovak nationalist (SNS) during the first government of Robert Fico 2006 – 2010, and event during his second government in 2012 – 2016. SNS appealed to the Slovak electorate by suing nationalistic and xenophobic slogans that attacked Hungarian and Roma minorities and accused them to establish an ethnic autonomous territory, or even proclaim that Roma are privileged over the majority since their social benefits. SNS was not the only one who used so called “Hungarian card” or even Roma issues to gain political points during the mobilization of the electorate, there were other parties and even more effective in this targetization that used and abuse minority issues to gain their position in the parliament and even in the government.

The second successful political party classified as populist that use in their early carrier these issues were social democrats, even when as silence issue they were able to mobilize the electoral on minority issues such Roma issues, Economic migrants, and refugees that “will raped our Slovak women” if we do not close the borders and oppose the quotas on refugees. Despite their massive campaigning to “secure Slovakia” in 2016 they do not gain more political preferences that they expected in comparison towards 2012, but they help with their rhetoric the fascists to enter to the parliament. Whose used harder xenophobic languages as their predecessors, for example they talked about Roma’s as parasites.

All political parties that have been mentioned above are also using other political agenda to be spreading their populist sentiment among the society and other mainstream political actors. For this purpose of this article, we entitled this political agenda as “cultural issues”. Under this political agenda political parties polarize the society according the basic division “us” versus “them”, where us is meaning those who are fighting against the concept of Open Western Society (OWS), and where “them” means those who are trying to protect it. Interesting is, that this group is overlapping with the group of minority issues (but its not a rule, rather those who are in favor with populist sentiment on minority group are also in favor with the anti-OSW sentiments). These cultural issues as political agenda were visible from 1992, with various variations. Mečiar governments use it against West and other international institutions (NATO, EU), Fico government use it partially, with the help of Slovak nationalist (SNS) in the area of security and defense, against USA, later in the opposition and after his removal from the prime minister office, Smer-SD regularly started to use cultural issues mixed by the minority issues.

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[2020.pdf](#)

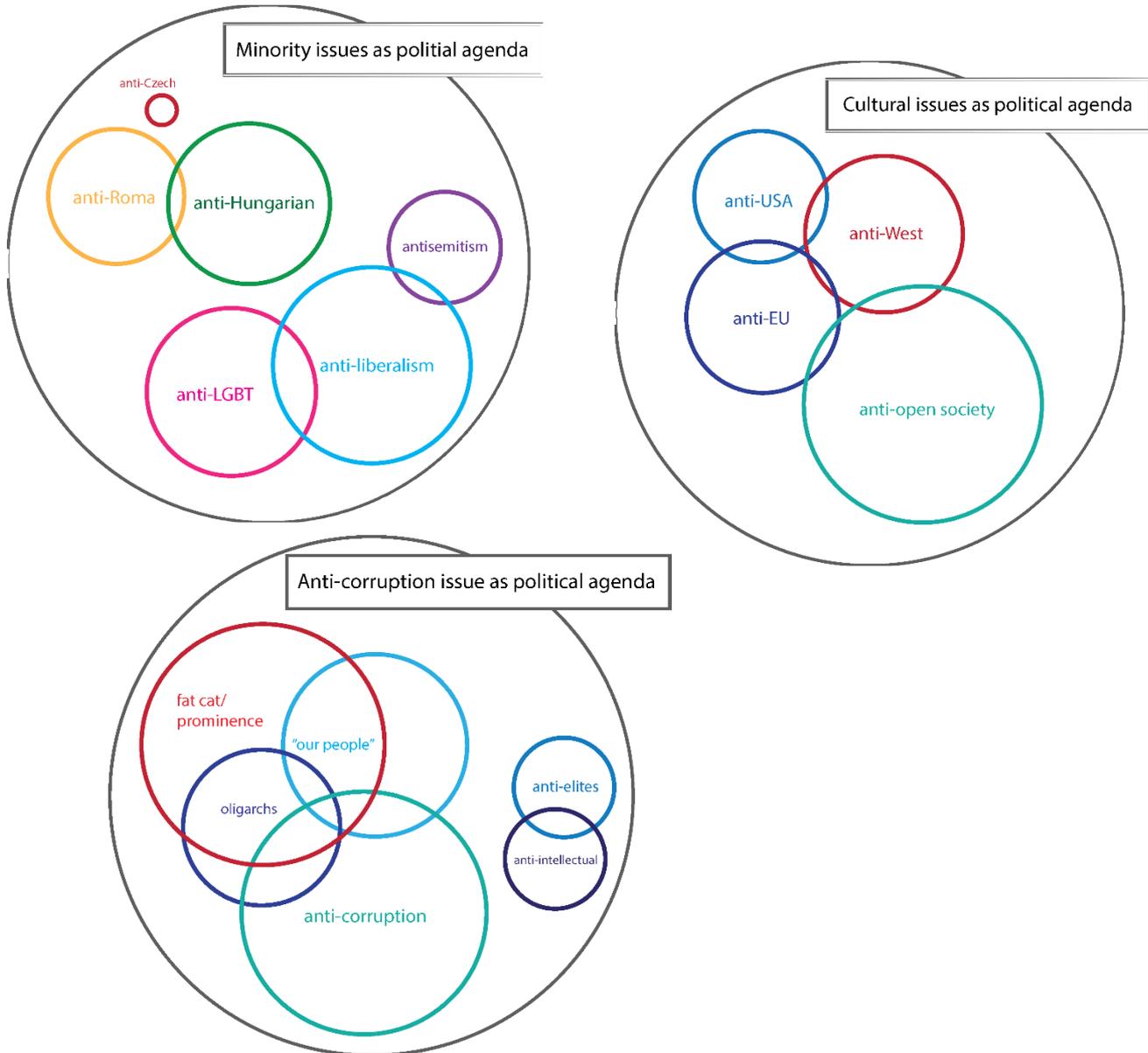
Figure 03. Minority issues as political agenda

Figure 04. Cultural issues as political agenda

Source: Own interpretation, according to the party program of selected populist and non-populist political parties in Slovakia<sup>44</sup>

The last dominant political agenda that was used by some of the populists political parties in the past, and improve their position in the parliamentary, and even governmentally seats was the anti-corruption sentiment deeply rooted in the society, and was marked as the most negative problem of Slovak society for decades.

Figure 05. Anti-corruption issues as political agenda



Source: Own interpretation, according to the party program of selected populist and non-populist political parties in Slovakia

<sup>44</sup> The division of populist political parties in Slovakia according to the various type of political agenda was set according to their party manifesto and their political communication before the election. The populist bubbles were designed according to the most and frequent words that were present in their manifestos and rhetoric and have the populism approaches “us” vs. “them”, see Žúborová, Viera, 2016; Vašečka - Žúborová, 2017; Vašečka - Žúborová, 2019.

But the main winner of this anti-corruption issue was the political movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) which after 2020 parliamentary election formed a government with constitutional majority, and Igor Matovič became the prime minister.

According to the Table 02 various populist were present in Slovakia from the year 2000, of course also before, which we suggest have a great impact on the party system in Slovakia. But our assumption is, if populist parties are on rise, are they also able to influence the policy agenda of other non-populist parties? Or even, are they able to reproduce themselves with clones even more populist and authoritarian than themselves?

**Table 02. Populist political parties in Slovakia according their position and political agenda in between 2000 - 2020**

Party Name	Party Leader	Position in system		Minority issues	Cultural issues
		Government	Parliament		
The People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	Vladimir Meciar	2006-2010	1998-2002 2002-2005	yes	yes
Slovak National Party (SNS)	Ján Slota	1998-2002 2006-2010	2010-2012	yes	yes
	Andrej Danko	2016-2020		yes	yes
Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	Robert Fico	2006-2010	1998-2002	yes	yes
		2012-2016 2016-2020	2002-2005 2020-lasts		
We are Family (Smer Rodina)	Boris Kollár	2020-lasts	2020-lasts	yes	yes
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO)	Igor Matovič	2020-lasts	2012-2016 2016-2020		
People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS)	Marián Kotleba	2016-2020		yes	yes
		2020-lasts			

We believed that they had a crucial impact, and it can be tracked down within 3 events that had great impact on the party system in Slovakia in recent years. Of course, we will take into consideration current events that were related to the pandemic outbreak at the beginning of 2020, the results of the election in February 2020, and the massive arrest in the second half of 2020. Nevertheless, we believed that the “mycelium of populism” was stabilized and strengthened in between these events.

- a) the murder of Jan Kuciak and his fiancé plus mass protest of civic initiative Decent Slovakia,
- b) the financial and migration crisis,
- c) the entry of neo-fascist political party into the parliament in 2016.

Contrary to our assumption and events related to the stabilization and strengthened of populist parties, the most populist far right party (for some of us define as neo-fascists party) LSNS has accommodated many of its key radical policy goals to mainstream political parties (maternal support, the position of the Unions, etc.). In general, there is a great level of convergence among standard new and old political parties in their programs, and even within populist political parties. But we assume that the most visible impact of LSNS is seeing in the area of political communication and political discourse among mainstream political parties. LSNS vocabulary was incorporated into other so called “soft populist” political parties and create a new “public enemy” that was rooted in the Slovak society for decade as “representant of open society” that included various minorities as LGBT, progressives, liberals, NGOs, scientists, media, intellectual caffè. For example, so called cultural wars between liberals and conservatives was feed by Smer-SD and SNS political parties, and occasionally supported by far-right and neo-Nazis LSNS (Nations in Transit, 2020).

In contrary, LSNS also has been influenced by the mainstream political parties and formally softened her party program before the election in 2020, they even taken over the social democrats’ agenda about nationalization (Trend.sk, 2020<sup>45</sup>).

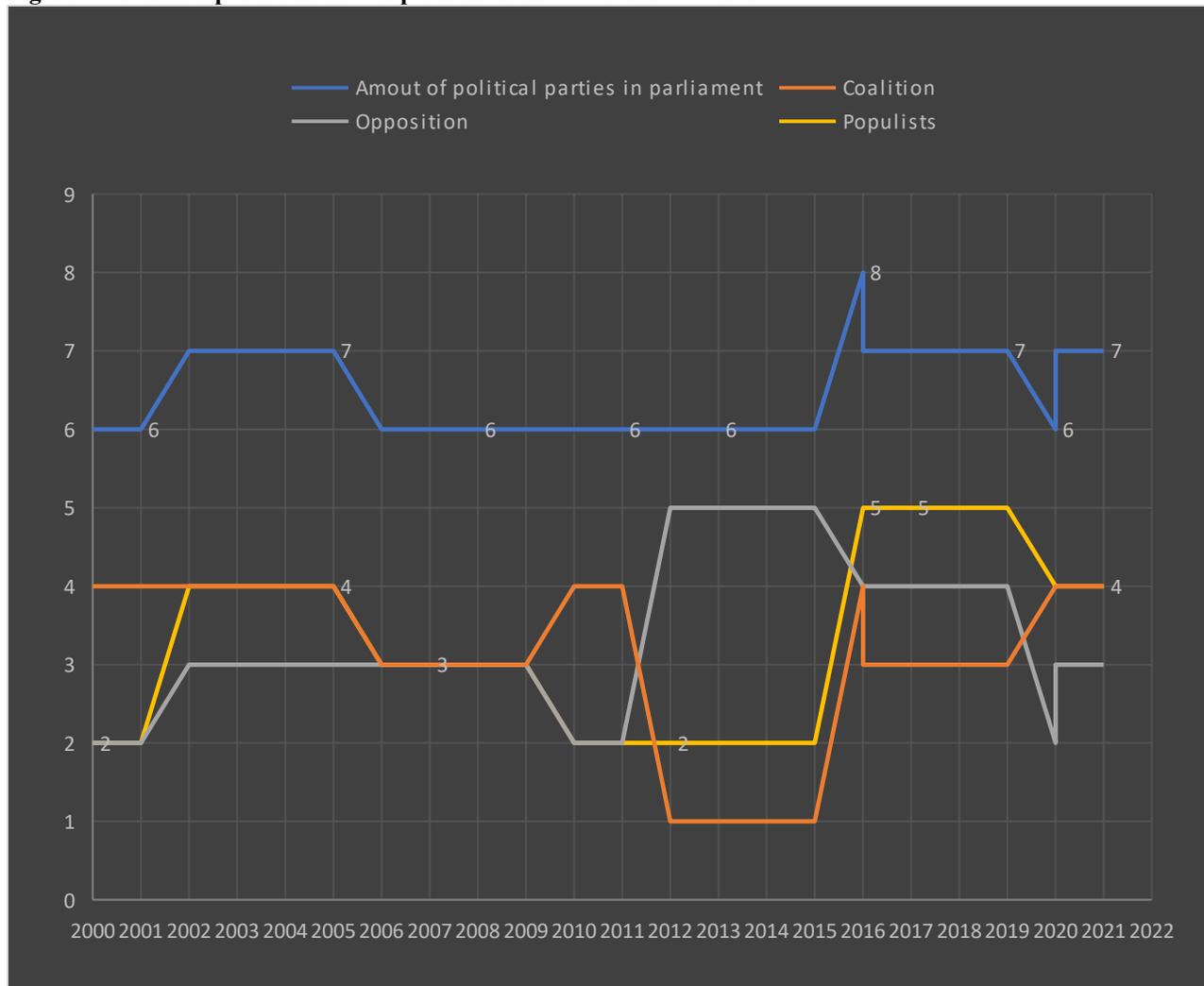
Despite these tendencies and potential impact of the populist political party in the system, its hard to hypothesize if they have also great impact on the party system as a whole and its inner polarization. We do not have enough data to assume it, because there were crucial events and social crisis that hit Slovak society. But we can assume that populist political parties used these societal crises to colonize the party system in Slovakia. The society was polarized enough even before, and populist used it for their purpose and political performance in the system.

### Populist Parties and the Party System

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/hodnotenie-programov-zdravotnictva-sas-zmakla-lsns-prebralaagendu-smeru>

Party system in Slovakia have its inner evolution and during decades it change from polarized party system in the 90-ties through moderate pluralism party system, up to multipartism with dominanty political party of social democrats in between 2012 – 2016 (Učeň, 2011; 2009; Gyarfášová, 2011). Despite the tendency to consolidate, after the election in 2016, and crucial year of 2018, the party system became more vulnerable and unpredictable during the past and even current government. For example, after the election in 2016 there were 4 political parties who formed the government, but this pack was promptly dismissed when one party of them so called #network internally collapsed withing their structure and government members and MP were migrated to other coalition or opposition political parties, even some of them formed their new units of independent MPs. The same scenario happened after the election in 2020, when former prime minister Peter Pellegrini who was the Number 1 at the candidate list of Smer-SD formed a new political party “Voice” (Hlas).

**Figure 03. Political parties in Slovak parliament in between 2000 – 2020**



For sure the raise of populist political parties within the parliament in Slovakia had a visible impact on its own stability and integrity and in recent decades it transited back to the polarized party system. But let us remain us, that these changes appeared after 3 crucial events than have a great impact on the political system and society as a whole: migration crisis, financial crisis and the murder of Jan Kuciak and Martina Kusnirova. And currently the fourth crucial event will remodel again the party system in Slovakia, the massive arresting of high-ranking police officials and businessmen connected to the former governmental political parties. A satiric question is, who would be able to survive such massive injections towards party system in a healthy condition? And this is also the reason why it is problematic to define some period of transit in the party system even if we assume that currently we are at the beginning of a transitional period without a clear outcome.

## Conclusion

Problematic of typology

Transition from populist to those how are against open society

Societal and political changes are crucial for the lifespan of new version of populist

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## Attachment 2 – A Version of this Study by a Local PhD Student

### 1. Political context

The Slovak Republic is still a relatively young European democracy, in which the system of political parties is formed only a few decades after the fall of authoritarian socialism, during which elections of political representation have always been a masquerade with the only possible result. The Velvet revolution of 1989 brought the then Czechoslovakia back on the path to freedom and democracy after many years, and the final division of this state of two fraternal nations in 1993 allowed the creation of two new sovereign democratic republics of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In the case of the Slovak Republic, we can say that populist forces were present in the leadership of the country from the very beginning.

In the early phase of the transformation process (1990-1992), there were two relevant political parties in Slovakia, whose internal characteristics and preferred political patterns revealed clear traces of "hard" populism emerging in Slovakia's political field. Both ruled the country from 1994 to 1998, and both also participated in power in subordinate position after the 2006 elections. The first - the Slovak National Party (SNS) - gained voter support mostly among ethnic nationalists, while the second - the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) based its strategy on resistance to liberal reforms and the power ambitions of its leader Vladimír Mečiar, who systematically built its image as an unchanging defender of the interests of ordinary citizens. (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, Bútora, Kollár, 2008)

In the years from 1994 to 1998, the political parties system in Slovakia was divided into two enemy blocs competing for power. The first was represented by authoritarian-nationalist parties, which can also be described as hard populist or as a "Mečiar's bloc." Their opponents were liberal-democratic forces, which became known as the "anti-Mečiar" bloc. The dominant line of conflict between them has become competition for the future nature of the political regime. At stake, therefore, was the shape of Slovakia's political future, whether it would continue to develop towards authoritarianism, international-political isolation, or all elements of liberal democracy would be restored and society's transformation in an environment of international and European cooperation would continue. The populist-nationalist wing included the political parties HZDS, SNS and ZRS (Slovak Workers' Association), the liberal-democratic bloc was represented by the KDH (Christian Democratic Movement), the DÚ (Democratic Union), the SDĽ (Democratic Left Party) and the Hungarian parties - MKDH (Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement), Spolužitie (Coexistence), MOS (Hungarian Civic Party). (Leška, 2013)

The "Mečiar" bloc was defeated after the parliamentary elections held in 1998. After 1998, the determination of the new democratically oriented government to meet the conditions of the European Union during the renewed accession process led to the implementation of many reform measures, including changes in the country's institutional system. These measures expanded the scope for the effective functioning of democratic mechanisms and limited the scope for the authoritarian practices of the populist parties to which Slovaks were accustomed between 1994 and 1998. (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, Bútora, Kollár, 2008)

Populist political parties came to power in Slovakia again after the elections in 2006, when a new generation of so-called "soft", mostly non-authoritarian populists from Smer-SD (Direction - Social democracy) became the dominant political force and formed a coalition government with already known parties of the previous generation of hard populists ES-HZDS (Peoples Party - Movement for Democratic Slovakia) and SNS. The cooperation of old and new populists has achieved a strong position of power in the country with the opportunity to shape and promote public policies in all socially important sectors and thus influence developments in the country. (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová 2008)

The next elections in 2010 posed a similar challenge as in 1998 elections to defeat a well-established coalition of old and new populist parties with authoritarian and nationalist tendencies and re-establishing a reformist centre-right government. According to expectations of many analysts, the election results brought another victory for Smer-SD, led by Robert Fico, which won 34.79% of the vote. Nevertheless, the government was formed by its political opponents - the right-centric SDKÚ-DS (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union - Democratic Party) with 15.42%

of the vote, the new Freedom and Solidarity Party (SaS) with a sufficiently strong leader and a controversial program of neoliberal orientation with elements of populism - 12.4%, Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) - 8.52% and another new party Most-Híd (Bridge), representing the interests of ethnic Hungarians (8.12%). (Zadorožňuk, 2011)

However, the governing coalition was very divided internally with difficulties to find compromises. Internal contradictions, conflicts between liberal and conservative demands on internal policy issues (decriminalization of marijuana, registered gay partnerships) between SaS and KDH, and differing views on the European Union and the measures taken by the Union to save the Eurozone eventually led to the breakdown of the government coalition. (Leška, 2013)

Early elections in 2012 showed a further increase in the electoral support of Smer - SD, which won 44.4% of the electoral votes, which secured it 83 seats. For the first time in the history of independent Slovakia, one political party won an absolute majority of seats in the National Council of the Slovak Republic, which enabled it to form a one-party government. Between 2012 and 2016, Slovakia was ruled by the only strong party representing the generation of "soft" non-authoritarian populism. During this period, other political parties with signs of either hard or soft populism gradually gained popularity among the people. (Leška, 2013)

In the 2016 elections, Smer-SD again won the election (it received 28.3% of the vote). The SNS returned to the government with Smer with a gain of 8.6% of the vote in the elections. Several new populist parties also gained the opposition seats in parliament. The new political movement Sme rodina (We Are the Family) of prominent Slovakian businessman Boris Kollár with 6.6% of the vote and partly the alliance of the parties Ordinary People and Independent Personalities - Nova (OLANO-Nova) led by Igor Matovič, which won 11% of the vote, can be considered as a populist entity. (Golias, Hajko, Piško 2017)

Smer-SD, as the only major party in Slovakia, did not present its electoral manifesto before the elections, came up with only five populist slogans focused on the economy, public services, raising living standards, strengthening security and the rule of law. The SNS, famous throughout its operation with great promises and later as part of the governments of corruption and clientelism, in 2016 offered citizens a supportive national program, according to which there should be more children than parents in Slovakia. It guaranteed the full defence capability or the food security of the country. We are family movement lured their voters with a promised execution amnesty for participants in three million execution proceedings, as well as food self-sufficiency of the country or "legal protection against disruption of good neighbourly cohabitation by non-adaptable citizens." (Golias, Hajko, Piško 2017)

OLANO-Nova published the election program two weeks before the elections. In a brief document prepared earlier, the movement, which proudly declares itself to be no party and has no structures, has promised, for example, free kindergarten places for all children or an increase in teachers' salaries by one-tenth each year. Last but not least, the elections in 2016 were also a significant success for the right-wing extremist and national populist party Kotleba - LSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia), which won 8% of the vote in the elections. The party's program had ten points with slogans such as We will stop further theft of the state!, We will make an order with parasites in the (Gypsy) settlements!, We will establish a fair social system!, We will put health above business!, We will not allow immigrants to occupy Slovakia! (Golias, Hajko, Piško 2017)

The last parliamentary elections in 2020 saw the last reorganization of political forces in the Slovak parliament. It can be said that the largest number of votes was again won by the parties, each of which shows signs of populism in its own way. The winner for the first time was Igor Matovič's OLANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) movement with 25.05% of the vote, followed by the Smer-SD party with 18.29% of the vote and the We Are a Family (8.24%) and LSNS (7.97%) parties. OLANO managed to form a government coalition with We Are a Family movement, SaS party (6.22%) and a new party founded by former President Andrej Kiska Za ľudí (For People) (5.77%). The parliamentary opposition was formed by the Smer-SD and Kotleba's LSNS parties. (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2020) The failure of Smer-SD, which did not win the parliamentary elections for the first time since 2006, as well as disagreements between former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini and party chairman Robert Fico, led to the split of the once strongest Slovak political party. Peter Pellegrini and many other members of the Smer-SD loyal to him left the party and founded a new populist and social-democratic political entity called Hlas-SD (Voice – Social Democracy), which currently dominates polls on Slovaks' electoral preferences. According to a FOCUS agency survey from January 2021, the party would be voted for by up to 24.3% of respondents, which

would mean a sovereignly win in the upcoming parliamentary elections over the current governing parties OĽANO (10.1%) and SaS (13.3%). (Slosiarik, 2021).

We can say that the presence of populism in the Slovak political parties system persists throughout the entire existence of the independent Slovak Republic. From 1994 to 1998, the government was made up of authoritarian hard populists who lost power between 1998 and 2006. Subsequently, the government was taken over by soft populists with the support of old hard populists between 2006 and 2010, and their power weakened again during 2010 and 2012. After the early elections in 2012 until 2016, the only party of soft populists from Smer-SD ruled, and after 2016 it continued with the support of parties such as the SNS and Most-Híd. During this government, new populist parties such as We Are the Family of Boris Kollár and the right-wing extremist ĽSNS of Marian Kotleba also joined the parliamentary opposition. At present, it would be more difficult to find a party that shows no signs of populism, both in the governing coalition and in the parliamentary opposition. Populists can be found in the government parties OĽANO, We Are a Family, SaS and we can also find them in opposition parties such as Smer-SD, Hlas-SD and ĽSNS.

### **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

In the previous chapter, we found that various types of populist political parties in the Slovak Republic have been operating since its inception in 1993. In this chapter, we will take a closer look at the roles that populist political entities have played and continue to play in Slovakia over time. The first question we are trying to answer is whether the populist parties have sought or are pursuing a strategy aimed at exploiting the gaps in representation by highlighting new or reviving old conflicts? It was characteristic of Slovakia that right in the first stage of democratic transition, the conflict line centre versus the periphery came to the fore in the form of Slovak nationalism, which largely intertwined with the socio-economic line. (Leška, 2013)

#### **Representation gap hypothesis**

The HZDS movement drew its electoral potential from several lines of conflict, used in the interest of power ambitions. Violations of the principles of parliamentary democracy, human rights and minority rights have led to the emergence of a new line of conflict over the nature of the political regime. As a result, the party system split into two blocks, creating a model of a "quasi-two-block" party system that met some of the hallmarks of polarized pluralism. (Leška, 2013)

During the first decade of the 21st century, the stratification structure of society was completed, which strengthened the link between the social status of voters and their choice. The middle class was under-represented in the social structure of society and, in terms of its income, was pushed to the level of the lower classes. As a result, the electoral background of the centre-right parties weakened and the social base of potential Smer-SD party voters, which was the only promising left-wing entity at the time, expanded. This can be proved by the stable growth of the Smer-SD voter base, which won an absolute majority of votes in the National Council of the Slovak Republic in the 2012 elections and formed a "one-colour" government. At the same time, during the whole period of transformation, value orientations, conflict lines of state versus church and Slovak centre versus the Hungarian periphery were present, along which political parties were formed and which significantly influenced political rivalry. (Leška, 2013)

Between 2012 and 2016, new controversial topics began to emerge, which were taken up mainly by newly formed populist parties such as ĽSNS or We Are Family, and by provoking conflict and polarizing attitudes on these topics, they received a sufficient number of votes to enter parliament after the 2016 elections. These were, in particular, oppositions to the reception of Muslim immigrants who fled to Europe from the devastation and hostility caused by the Islamist terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS / ISIL) and the related war in Syria. The willingness of the European Union to accept large numbers of immigrants and the plan to settle them according to quotas in all EU member states provoked a high degree of Euroscepticism and Islamophobic populism throughout Europe, and Slovakia was no exception.

Immigrants are a problem for conservative, far-right and Eurosceptic populists because they carry other cultural traditions and are portrayed in the vocabulary of populists as competition in the labour market with an impact on the growth of domestic unemployment. It was also emphasized the fear that Islamist terrorists could slip into Europe among migrants from the Middle East, who could then attack at any time. Concerns about immigration also arise

from the opinion of statistical authorities about the higher birth rate of Muslim immigrants and the gradual extinction of the original population of Europe. In immigration, not only the internal enemy is identified, but also acts as an external enemy if it is considered at the level of potential danger. This presumption is reinforced when migrants are seen as followers of a different religion, usually, Islam, who are unable or unwilling to adapt to European traditions, resulting in the creation of closed immigrant communities in large cities. (Štefančík, 2011) Currently, the main topic that populist parties are trying to exploit by provoking the conflict is a way of fighting against the pandemic of COVID-19, which is caused by a newly discovered coronavirus SARS-COV 2. Especially in the autumn of 2020, Slovakia witnessed the strongest attempts to sabotage government measures to combat this pandemic. Despite the ban on assembly, as one of the anti-pandemic measures, on October 17, 2020, hundreds of demonstrators, football ultras fans or supporters and sympathizers of the far-right ĽSNS party met in front of the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic and protested against the government's restrictive measures. (Habas 2020) Subsequently, a month later, on the symbolic date of the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution 17.11.2020, another mass protests took place, this time not only in Bratislava but also in other large Slovak cities. This time, the chairmen of populist opposition parties such as Marián Kotleba from the ĽSNS or Róbert Fico from Smer-SD appeared as speakers on the protest. We can also see this protest as an example of populists parasitizing on emphasizing socially current conflicts, and in this case also at the cost of a huge risk of spreading a dangerous contagious disease precisely as a result of mass gatherings during a pandemic.

### **Contagion hypothesis**

Another question we try to answer in this chapter is: Does the rise of populist parties accompany the overall spread of populist ideas on the political agenda of non-populist parties? The regime of liberal democracy, a market economy, EU membership and Euro-Atlantic foreign and security policy are the de facto pillars of the current social establishment of the Slovak Republic, complying with them (both in terms of gaining public support and real exercise of power) is key parameters in considering if parties in Slovakia belong to categories of "program" or "populist" political parties. (Mesežník, 2016)

Political parties, which in the conditions of Slovakia could be described as program parties (ie ideologically and more clearly profiled parties, which mostly belong to European party groups of various ideological orientations and are therefore the opposite of populist parties), were characterized by a high degree of compliance with these pillars - so in its activities, as well as in the rhetoric used to gain voter support. These were the parties that initiated the process of democratic transformation (establishment of a democratic regime, the introduction of a market economy, preparation for accession to the EU and NATO and adaptation to membership in these organizations). They did not have to deal with the dilemma faced by populist parties - how to remain part of the system and profit from it, and at the same time define themselves against it so that they could gain the support of the part of the electorate that is critical of the system or its individual aspects. (Mesežník, 2016)

On the contrary, populists in the government, whether initially "hard" (HZDS, SNS, ZRS), or later "soft" (Smer-SD), demonstrated a setting that was characterized by a special kind of opposition to systemic changes as such and against some characteristics of the new system, such as criticism of post-November democratization, resistance to the establishment of a market economy, diverse criticism of the collective West, ie the EU and NATO, membership, domestic intellectual and cultural elites etc. (Mesežník, 2016)

We can therefore say that since the establishment of an independent Slovakia, there has been a clearly observable difference in the agendas of the program and populist parties. The political agenda of the program parties was mostly firmly profiled and anchored, and populism usually did not occur in it and therefore could not have a significant positive effect on the strengthening of populist parties. An exception, however, can be the situation after the elections in 2016, when the program parties Most-Híd and new centre-right Siet' decided to break the barrier that separated them from populist parties such as Smer-SD and SNS and joined the government coalition with them, thus helped continue their rule. (Mesežník, 2016)

### **Polarisation hypothesis**

Regarding the topic of the role of populists in the system of political parties in Slovakia, the relevant question is also, whether the growth of populist parties also caused a more intense polarization of political party system? As we mentioned in the previous chapter, after the establishment of an independent Slovakia, a model of several political parties was created, in which there was at first a fleeting hint of a multiparty type with a dominant party, as HZDS won significantly more votes than other political parties in 1992 and 1994. limit of 40%. However, it soon

transformed into the seed of a two-party bloc model. The core of the first populist bloc consisted of the HZDS and the SNS, the second bloc was mostly represented by the KDH, Democratic Union (DÚ), SDE and Hungarian coalition program parties.

"Between 1994 and 1998, two hostile blocs of political parties were created, the authoritarian-nationalist and liberal-democratic forces, which were named the "Mečiar's" and the "anti-Mečiar" bloc, where the dominant conflict line became a competition for the character of the political regime." (Leška, 2013:77) This model of the party system was closest to the "two-block" party system, which, according to the typology of Giovanni Sartori (2005), would meet some features of polarized pluralism.

The dominant conflict line "mečiarism" - "anti-mečiarism" ended in the 1998 elections with the victory of the liberal-democratic political parties Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), KDH, SDE and the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK). Together with the newly formed Civic Understanding Party (SOP), they formed a government coalition, chaired by Mikuláš Dzurinda. There was a complete alteration of the governing coalition, and the opposition was given to the parties forming the core of the nationalist-populist bloc - the HZDS and the SNS. Six political parties were represented in parliament, but two of the original pre-election coalitions were transformed into political parties. Thus, in terms of Sartori's format, the party system moved on the border between moderate pluralism and the atomized party system. (Leška, 2013)

In the 2006 elections, there was again a complete alternation of the governing coalition. The parties of the previous right-wing coalition SDKÚ-DS, KDH and SMK did not get a sufficient number of votes to form a government, as the ANO party did not get into parliament. The coalition government was formed by Smer-SD as the strongest political entity, which won a third of the parliamentary seats together with ĽS-HZDS and SNS, which re-entered the National Council after one term outside parliament. During this period, the system of moderate pluralism continued and strengthened. (Leška, 2013)

After the 2010 elections, the Smer-SD led coalition was replaced by a coalition of centre-right parties. From the original parties of the core of the right centre, however, only SDKÚ-DS and KDH remained, the SMK replaced the new "Hungarian" entity Most-Híd and they needed the newly formed subject Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) to gain the necessary majority. However, the governing coalition was very divided internally and found it difficult to find compromises. Thus, a tripolar configuration of party competition was created, when, in addition to the classical right - left centre scheme, a separate pole of the neoliberal right was created. Smer-SD recorded a stable growth of the electorate base and in the 2012 elections won an absolute majority of votes in the National Council of the Slovak Republic which allowed them forming of "one-colour" government. According to the typology of Giovanni Sartori, it expresses the transition from a model of moderate pluralism to the multiparty system with a dominant political party. (Leška, 2013)

In the 2016 elections, Smer-SD did not repeat a success that would be enough for a one-colour government again, the SNS party, formerly the opposition Most-Híd party, joined the coalition with it, but also the centre-right Sieť (Network), which soon began to disintegrate and lost its coalition position. Subjects such as the alliance of the OĽANO movement and the centre-right NOVA party or the right-liberal SaS, both showing varying degrees of populism to various degrees, joined the opposition. Opposition seats were also won by new populist parties ĽSNS and We are a family, which to varying degrees showed anti-establishment and anti-system tendencies. It is the presence of such parties and an agenda incompatible with other coalition and opposition parties that may indicate a shift from a system of moderate pluralism to polarized pluralism. At present, it could be said that the trend towards a system of polarized pluralism has persisted. The coalition formed after the 2020 elections could itself be divided into two camps, which are often in opposition, especially as regards the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is probably the most difficult challenge that any government since the establishment of the Slovak Republic ever faced. On the one hand, there is a camp of the populist parties OĽANO and We are Family, on the other hand, there is a camp of more program parties SaS and Za ľudí (For People). The Smer-SD party got into opposition and went through a split itself, which culminated in a split into two entities, the old Smer-SD and the new Hlas-SD. Last but not least, the far-right, anti-establishment party ĽSNS has once again joined the parliamentary opposition. Thus, the system of political parties in Slovakia now appears to be more polarized than ever before, and the number of populist parties in parliament has also significantly increased compared to the situation 10 years ago. The hypothesis

that the rise of populist parties has also caused a more intense polarization of party systems, therefore, appears to be true.

### **Elective affinity coalition hypothesis**

The last question we want to answer in this chapter is whether there is an observable phenomenon in Slovakia, when populist parties enter into government coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if at least one of the typical topics of populist discourse appears in their agenda, for example, nationalist, anti-establishment or Eurosceptic topics? Such a phenomenon can be observed, for example, in 2006, when the Smer-SD party won the parliamentary elections for the first time. The national element has been present in the activities of the Smer party from the very beginning. It is demonstrated by taking "pro-Slovak" ("nationwide") attitudes on issues of interethnic and international relations, in the interpretation of several historical events and personalities, in the overall view of the development of society after the fall of communism or in the applied coalition strategies. (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová 2008)

After the 2002 elections, when Smer became a parliamentary opposition party, it acted as an irreconcilable opposition force, criticizing all the major reform steps of Dzurinda's centre-right government in the socio-economic field. He promised major changes if he came to power. The way of communicating with the electorate, the diction of criticism of the government's activities from the position of opposition forces, the formulation of proposals for solving problems - all this bore obvious signs of populism. (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová 2008) In 2006, Smer-SD formed a government coalition with parties considered to be the bearers of nationalist populism of the LS-HZDS and the SNS. We can therefore say that the nationalist appeal united the parties of the old hard populism and the new soft populism into one coalition. A similar phenomenon occurred after the parliamentary elections in 2016. When Smer-SD, in addition to program parties such as Most-Híd and the Siet', once again joined forces with populist SNS, with which it was once again united by nationalist themes.

## **Conclusion**

Populist political parties are an integral part of the system of political parties in the Slovak Republic and at certain times had a very fundamental influence on the country's leadership. In the first chapter of this work, we discussed the development of populist political parties in Slovakia. In the 1990s, it manifested itself as a hard, nationalist, authoritarian populism, represented by the strong governing parties of the HZDS and the SNS. Later in the 2000s was replaced by soft populism with the centrist and later increasingly social-democratic ideology of the Smer party (later Smer-SD) and in 2010s the last generation of populist parties developed, which differ significantly ideologically. These include parties such as the conservative, pro-European or anti-corruption movement OĽANO, the nationalist-conservative and Eurosceptic movement We Are the Family, neoliberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and the far-right, anti-system, extremist-populist party ĽSNS. Populists are traditionally very successful in Slovakia in terms of electoral preferences, and their political subjects achieve a high degree of relevance in the party system. It could be said that the most successful political parties in the parliamentary elections since the establishment of Slovakia are the populist ones, such as the Smer-SD party, which managed to win the elections up to 4 times in a row between 2006 and 2016.

Regarding the roles of populist political parties in Slovakia's party system, we answered four important questions. The first was the question of whether populist political parties will usually use a strategy of bringing in new or reviving old conflicts in order to increase their electoral preferences? The answer to this question is yes. In the 1990s, populists benefited from a conflict over the overall shape of the political regime. In the 2000s, the Smer party gained strength due to its behaviour as an irreconcilable opposition force, criticizing all the major reform steps of Dzurinda's centre-right government in the socio-economic field. Between 2012 and 2016, new controversial topics began to emerge, which were taken up mainly by newly formed populist parties such as ĽSNS or We Are Family, and by provoking conflict and polarizing attitudes on these topics, they received a sufficient number of votes to enter parliament after the 2016 elections. These were, in particular, oppositions to the reception of Muslim immigrants who fled to Europe from the devastation and hostility caused by the Islamist terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS / ISIL) and the related war in Syria. Currently, the main topic that populist parties are trying to exploit by provoking the conflict is a way of fighting against the pandemic of COVID-19, which is caused by a newly discovered coronavirus SARS-COV 2.

Another question we were looking for an answer to is whether the rise of populist parties accompany the overall spread of populist ideas on the political agenda of non-populist parties? We can therefore say that since the establishment of an independent Slovakia, there has been a clearly observable difference in the agendas of the program and populist parties. The political agenda of the program parties was mostly firmly profiled and anchored, and populism usually did not occur in it and therefore could not have a significant positive effect on the strengthening of populist parties.

Third question we tried to answer is whether the growth of populist parties also caused a more intense polarization of political party system? In the 2000s, the system of political parties in Slovakia coincided most with the model of moderate pluralism, later with the emergence of new populist parties, including entities with anti-systemic agendas, shifted more to the model of polarized pluralism, and this shift basically continues till now. Thus, it can be said that the growth of populists in Slovak politics contributed to a more intense polarization of the party system.

The last question we wanted to solve is whether populist parties enter into government coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if at least one of the typical topics of populist discourse appears in their agenda, for example, nationalist, anti-establishment or Eurosceptic topics? It turned out that nationalism is a strong topic that can unite populist parties in Slovakia. In the 2006, Smer-SD formed a government coalition with parties considered to be the bearers of nationalist populism LS-HZDS and the SNS. We can therefore say that the nationalist appeal united the parties of the old hard populism and the new soft populism into one coalition. A similar phenomenon occurred after the parliamentary elections in 2016. When Smer-SD, in addition to program parties such as Most-Híd and the Siet', once again joined forces with populist SNS, with which it was once again united by nationalist themes.

In the last chapter of this work, we described how populist political forces over time influenced the shape of the system of political parties in Slovakia. It has changed several times since the establishment of an independent Slovakia. In the early 2000s, it took the form of moderate pluralism according to Giovanni Sartori's typology or limited multipartism according to Steven B. Wolinetz's typology. At present, with the emergence of populist parties with anti-system agendas and a developing multipolar form of competition, the form of political parties system has shifted more to the Sartori's model of polarized pluralism or Wolinetz's extended multipartism with something between moderate and extended degree of polarisation and multipolar form of competition.

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