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The National Report for task 7.4 on Slovakia

DEMOS Project¹

SLOVAK POLITICAL PARTIES' RESPONSES TO POPULISM

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This national report aimed to find out how selected Slovak political parties perceive their populist and non-populist competitors, especially how they react and compete with populists and their political campaigns in the political competition. Through semi-structured interviews with high ranking members of the political parties, we learned their attitudes, opinions, insights and experiences regarding the confrontation with populism. Our questions were answered by Peter Kmec, a member of the National Assembly (Parliament) and a member of the presidency of the Hlas-SD (Voice-Social Democracy) party; Branislav Tichý, Secretary-General of the non-parliamentary movement Progressive Slovakia; Milan Kabina, a member of the presidency of the non-parliamentary Christian Democratic Movement (KDH); and Ábel Ravasz (then) a member of the presidency of the non-parliamentary Most-Híd (The Bridge) party.

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The political (analytical-conceptual) context: non-populist vs. populist parties in 2018-2021

It is usually controversial and certainly normative to label a party as populist or non-populist in Slovakia. Sometimes, political parties mutually call each other populist while they see themselves as being non-populist. However, occasionally there is an agreement which party they define as populist. For example, all of the interviewed high ranked members of non-populist parties in our sample mentioned OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) as a populist political party/movement at the national and European level. Curiously, Meyer's 2021 report suggested (p.8) that there was only a single case of populists in power in Europe in early 2021, namely in Poland. Interestingly, Sme rodina (We are a Family) was seen as more populist than OĽaNO among experts involved in this study. Maybe this has to do with the time frame – while political parties represented were asked in spring of 2021, the report was written in the fall of 2021.

There are parties that are partially (in some policy areas) or occasionally (e.g. during election campaigns) seen as populist, as we discuss further. As put by Rossi (2020), a majority of those parties that are politically active in Slovakia are espousing some form of populism. OĽaNO, the parliamentary party with the highest number of MPs (but with the lowest party membership), holding the position of Prime Minister, is characterized as populist by scholars (Zulianello, 2020; Ehl, 2020; Sekerák, 2019; Kneuer, 2019).

The second strongest governing populist political party in the Parliament with conservative agenda is We are Family (Sme rodina). It is also seen as a populist movement (Školkaý and Žúborová, 2019; Stojarová, 2018). Specifically, Sme rodina focuses on „out-groups“ while OĽaNO does not show such communication symptoms (Marincea and Školkaý, 2020).

The least populist party that presented itself as a libertarian in the new coalition is Freedom and Solidarity (SaS - Sloboda a Solidarita) with light nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Stajarová, 2018; Rybár - Spáč, 2017).

Finally, the fourth coalition partner, Za ľudí party (For the People) was seen as a non-populist party (but there were some suggestions among interviewed politicians that it may turn to populism, too).

The opposition is also formed by mostly populist political parties. It is difficult to assess the party “Voice - Social Democracy” (Hlas - Sociálna demokracia) led by the former prime minister Peter Pellegrini. It is a relatively new party established mostly by former members of Smer-SD (Direction-SD).

Yey the most extreme form of populist demagoguery (see Table 1) is represented by the far-right extremist political party Kotlebovci-LSNS (Kotlebas – Peoples' Party Our Slovakia). This party also faced an internal crisis and split. As a result, there are some representatives of the newly formed party REPUBLIKA in the Parliament.

The largest populist opposition political party is the Direction - Social Democracy (Smer-SD), led by the former triple prime minister Robert Fico.

In general, there seems to be a rather low degree of party system stability (Smolecová & Šárovec, 2021). The 2020 general elections were about fundamental issues – (anti)corruption and captured state, or, as put by Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009, 838), following a long-term “clean–corrupt” issue divide. The current form of populism by OĽaNO and Sme rodina

was also labelled as a “sort of anti-corruption populism“ (Kollai, 2020), or, as put by Abel Ravasz, interviewed representative of the Most-Híd party (The Bridge), OLaNO can be seen as a „referendum populist (movement)“. From the perspective of sociological cleavages, the urban-rural cleavage proved to have the strongest influence on the electoral support of political parties in the 2020 general elections (Belobrad, 2020).

Clearly, analytical dichotomy (populists versus non-populists) blurs reality in local conditions. If one uses categorisation based on dichotomy, then one should note division suggested by Ravasz (one of the interviewed politicians) who would prefer, in the local context, two categories of populists: those pro-open society and those anti-open society. However, the relationship between the constitutive elements of such a scenario (ultimately, populism vs neoliberalism and multiculturalism), is, again, in reality as well in theory less clear-cut (Joppke, 2021).

Analytically, as we have documented in another DEMOS report (Školkaý, 2021), there is a rather polarized political pluralism bloc with four types of parties in the country (and possibly in other countries), as it was seen before the 2020 general elections: (a) by and large or exclusively non-populist parties such as Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), Most-Híd (The Bridge), Za ľudí (For the People); b) parties with populist rhetoric (demagoguery) and more or less identifiable ideology (e.g. Slovak National Party (SNS), Kotlebovci - Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (LSNS); c) populist parties (e.g. OLaNO² - Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, Sme rodina (We are a Family); and d) borderline cases – (e.g. Smer-SD – Direction-SD). This quasi-four bloc polarised pluralism emerged again after the 2020 general elections. Yet it may be confusing to see populist parties as a homogeneously negative and static phenomenon. Clearly, both OLaNO and Sme rodina supported the reform of the captured state affiliated with grand corruption after the general elections. It is also true that Sme rodina has become more hesitant and more ambivalent in its policies and rhetoric throughout 2021. Smer-SD, controversial or borderline case, as it turned out, has moved towards the category „c“ - a more populist party with hardly any social-democratic ideology (that would qualify it among category „b“) as it claims to have. Similarly, Ravasz pointed out that even the Most-Híd, non-populist party, may be actually seen as populist on the regional level, because there is competition based on ethnicity.

Thus, the majority of parties present in the current national parliament, especially opposition parties but also Sme rodina, are more or less populist parties, or they at least occasionally (e.g. during the election campaign or when in opposition or with respect to specific issues like undocumented migration) utilise populist rhetoric and/or support certain populist policies or block non-populist policies. This can be seen in the following Table 1 that reflects the assessment of key populist features (considering local political-social environment) among political parties as of October 2021 in Slovakia. Only political parties that could cross the 5% threshold according to the most recent survey are mentioned here. Therefore, the clearly non-populist For the People party (that anyway faced internal disintegration throughout 2021) is missing here. In contrast, non-parliamentary Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) as well as newly established REPUBLIKA (as mentioned, founded by break-away former Kotlebovci-LSNS members) have been included in this survey. The assessment is based on a non-representative email survey among authors of this study and selected local political scientists (Sample size: 15+3, total number of experts who answered was five). The focus was on any occurrences (rhetoric, policies, programmes and/or manifestos) of suggested

² It is actually coalition of OLaNO, Zmena zdola (Change from the bottom), NOVA and KU (Christian Union)

analytical categories among cited parties. We discuss further details of this mini-survey in the part on methodology.

Table 1: Populism and the Most Popular Slovak political parties (October 2021)³

(Explanation: numbers in brackets state how many experts supported this assessment, „P“ means partial or a very low level of occurrence, „?“ means doubts or uncertainty by an assessor)

	OLaNO	Sme rodina	SaS	Smer-SD	Hlas - SD	PS	Republika	KDH
Demagoguery	X (4)	X (5)	X (1)	X (5)	X (2)		X (5)	
Nationalism	X (1) + P (1)	X (4)	X (1)	X (4)	X (2)		X (4)	X (1)
Exclusion of certain groups	X (1)	X (4)	X (1)	X (4)			X (5)	X (1) + P (1)
Bad Elites	X (5)	X (5)	X (1)	X (5)	X (4)	X (1)	X (5)	X (1)
Good People	X (3)	X (3)	? (1)	X (3)	X (2)	X (2+ ?)	X (2)	X (1)

Table 2 was filled in only by a single researcher. We keep it here for further discussion and possible calibration. There may be some duplicity with some items in the Table 1. For example, demagoguery may be logically seen as based on emotional appeals. Similarly, „general will“ may be seen as compatible with „good people“ indicator (although, of course, there is not a 100% overlap).

Table 2: Additional Indicators of Populism

	OLaNO	Sme rodina	SaS	Smer - SD	Hlas - SD	PS	Republika	KDH
So called „general will“	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes	P
Emotional appeal vs. Rationality	yes	yes	P	yes	P	no	yes	P

As can be seen from the Table 1, the most populist but in fact right-wing populist party is REPUBLIKA. Because of having an ideology, it can not be seen as a standard or „pure“ example of a populist party. In contrast, typical populist examples seem to be Sme rodina and Smer-SD. It is interesting to note that one is a conservative movement, while the other is formally social democratic party. One is in the government, the other is in the opposition. Finally, and perhaps ironically, Sme rodina is radically excluding any possible cooperation with Smer-SD. The second group of qualitatively less significant, but still relatively high level populist subjects would include OLaNO and, less so, Hlas-SD. Again, one party is in the government, the other is in the opposition. One is conservative-liberal, the other is social democratic-liberal.

³ Prieskum: Voľby by vyhral Hlas pred SaS a Smerom (14. okt 2021): <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22763498/prieskum-politickych-stran-oktober-ako-2021.html>

Methodology

The key part of this analysis follows general methodology as suggested by the Work Package leader. Four semi-structured interviews (instead of two requested) were conducted in March and June 2021 with the representatives of four Slovak political parties. We were asked to contact one non-populist party and one populist party. As could be expected, typical populist parties were not interested in presenting their ideas when faced with the questionnaire. Three of those parties that agreed to talk, are currently not represented in the Slovak Parliament. These are Most-Híd, KDH and Progressive Slovakia (PS). The two latter ones are represented in the European Parliament. In contrast, HLAS-SD, is, as mentioned, a recently (summer 2020) founded opposition party present only in the national parliament but not in the European Parliament. Although we were asked to select one populist and one non-populist party, for reasons mentioned above we considered it a better strategy to broaden our sample. For the mini-survey presented in Table 1, we contacted about 15 local political scientists. Only one political scientist (except the authors of the study) answered this call. One political scientist had difficulty to understand the questions.

The key indicators (Demagoguery, nationalism, exclusion of certain groups, bad elites and good people) reflect global and local definitions and specifics of populism. In particular, nationalism may not be a universal feature of populism, but it is a typical feature of populism, as is the case in local conditions where it is a significant indicator. However, for example OLaNO does not show significant, if any, level of nationalist discourse. Demagoguery is certainly part of populism, but separately may not represent only populism – it is also part of rhetorics of radical right or left wing political parties. In other words, it is a necessary but not sufficient part of the definition of populism. Exclusion of certain groups is a more universal feature of populism, but, again, there can be populist leaders and movements that do not exclude others, such as PODEMOS in Spain. Of course, it can be discussed whether PODEMOS is actually a populist movement. In general, however, exclusion works in local context. For example, experts in medicine were excluded as trustworthy persons from consideration by some populists in Slovakia during the COVID19 epidemic. Igor Matovič, leader of OLaNO, also excluded some experts, politicians and other individuals in his rhetoric especially throughout 2020. Typically for Matovič, these persons were, at the same time „bad“ elites. Yet the majority of experts in our sample do not see OLaNO as having an exclusionist approach as a typical feature. However, some opposition political parties, especially Smer-SD, but also Kotlebovci-LSNS and later on REPUBLIKA, used the label „bad“ elites quite frequently in their discourse. Yet sometimes Matovič and other OLaNO representatives referred to real examples of bad, corrupted elites of the previous government or state authorities, or their supporters among other elites from other political parties. Even more controversial indicator may be, potentially, „good people.“ Clearly, it is a necessary and typical feature of populism. But it very much depends on the context.

There were further suggested indicators of populism, as can be seen in Table 2. These included „the will of the people“ and „emotional versus rational appeals“. Analytically, it is very much important in what context is the term „the will of the people“ used. For example, if there is some policy supported by public opinion, it can be argued that this really is the will of the people. Of course, not all policies supported by the will of the people may be reasonable and correct. Similarly, politics should include some emotional appeals and

political decisions are fundamentally based on values. Yet too much emotions, and especially negative emotions, is certainly against rational decision-making that should, ultimately, prevail in functional democracies.

Shared Positions and Opinions and Key Differences

The research questions addressed in particular which Slovak political parties and what they consider populist phenomena, what communication strategies their parties choose in response to populists, what strategies and reactions to populists the parties use in the pre-election campaign, and also how they try to fight against populists after the elections.

Our respondents generally agreed on (partial) definition of what makes political parties populist, although there are differences in what they see as a fundamental feature. Peter Kmec considers populist political entities as parties and movements that do not have a real political program, and their promises are not based on real foundations. Branislav Tichý, Secretary-General of the Progressive Slovakia movement, defines populist parties as entities that do not have a clear ideology and are guided by current public emotions and popular demand. According to Milan Kabina, all populist parties have one specific common principle: they use the popularity of their leader to be even more populist and gain more preferences, votes, seats and power. They also tend to promise whatever it takes to obtain those goals. Abel Ravasz briefly defined populists as those who use populist rhetoric to gain more preferences or abuse it to gain power.

All of the interviewed members of political parties agreed that the communication and rhetoric of populists is related to “the people”. Populists are using all variations that embrace the citizens, and give them the feeling that all their political processes are connected to them, as: “we do it for the people”, “or people need it”, or “or our voters are calling for it”. This is a traditional understanding of one of the key components of populism. All the interviewed members of the political parties agreed that populism influences the voters’ behavior through emotions or without having a realistic political program, with promises not based on real basis.

There are, however, differences as which party is actually populist. Peter Kmec, a representative of the Hlas-SD party, considers Marian Kotleba's far-right nationalist LSNS party to be a populist party. In contrast, Christian Democrat Milan Kabina includes Smer-SD and Hlas-SD among the current populist parties and claims that the Progressive Slovakia movement also uses light-populist rhetoric. On the other hand, he described the parties KDĽ, Za ľudí and SPOLU (Together) as non-populist. Ábel Ravasz, former deputy chair of the Most-Híd party, also described Smer-SD and Hlas-SD as populists. Like Kabina, he pointed out that at present, it is more difficult to identify non-populist parties than populist ones. He considers KDĽ, SaS or ethnic parties such as Most-Híd to be non-populist parties.

Regarding the possibility of responding to the actions of current populist parties in government or parliament, extra-parliamentary political parties and movements agree that they have very little space in the media and are not nearly as visible as parliamentary parties, so they have very limited opportunities to respond to populist initiatives of parties in power. All interviewed members also stated that it is hard for them to promote their political ideas and policies in the local political environment, where populist political parties can aggregate more powerful slogans and strategies with the ability to target the majority of potential voters. They understand the political and communication conditions, and even are aware of their own weakness. However, they pessimistically conclude that this is a vicious cycle without any way out. Ironically, they stated that if one is dreaming to be successful in the Slovak political environment, then one needs to be populist. Vice versa, they were sceptical about using rational arguments in political communication. As it was bluntly stated in one

answer: “I think we are losing, we are really not able to react to it in a proper way. In these conditions and this environment, I think we are not able to communicate our policies, because we are not able to do it” (member of non-populist minority party, Most-Híd). “The mainstream political parties are not able to communicate simply with symbols and stereotypes, because it's not their identity to degrade their position and their party vision”(Member of non-populist minority party, Most-Híd).

Most of our respondents, except for Milan Kabina, agreed that populist parties sometimes actually express and try to address legitimate concerns and issues related to the current political, economic or social situation in the country. Branislav Tichý warns, however, that populist solutions are often exaggerated and unrealistic, such as Sme rodina's promise to build 25 000 new state rental flats annually

Political Party Present in the National Parliament: HLAS-SD

This questionnaire was filled in by Peter Kmec who is the member of the Party Presidium of the party HLAS-SD (Voice-Social Democracy) and the Deputy Chair of the Committee on European Affairs in the Parliament. He was also a former ambassador of Slovakia to the USA.

He identifies three populist parties: two governmental parties - OLaNO and Sme rodina, and one opposition party Kotlebovci-LSNS. According to Kmec they are populist because they lack a political program, and their promises are not based on reality. His party HLAS-SD therefore chose a slogan that reacts to such populist messages. While OLaNO's main slogan was “*We can make it*”, HLAS - SD's slogan (then under Smer-SD) focused on the nature of the change that should come: “Responsible Change“. Paradoxically the electoral programme which Kmec points to as a tool against populists is also not a real comprehensive electoral programme, but just a poster with three simple promises or positions. „*Retirees deserve a 13th pension. Young families get extra support. Doctors have a duty to Slovakia.*“⁴

Asked what the best strategy to choose when confronting populists is, Peter Kmec said it is best to compete with them with a realistic program and to explain to voters the risks associated with voting for populists. As mentioned, the Smer-SD party, of which Kmec was a member before the 2020 elections, did not present any real program, just simple unsubstantiated promises.

Although Kmec believes that it is necessary to confront populists with real political programmes and to explain the risk of voting for them to the voters, he admits that such parties may articulate legitimate concerns when it comes to the rule of law and corruption. During the previous term, the parties present in the Parliament initiated some populist measures such as stricter anti-abortion bills, or the restriction of opening hours of shops on Sundays.

On a European level there does not seem to be any clearly populist topic that is brought forward by the populist parties in the EP (OLaNO and LSNS). As the party HLAS-SD was founded only after the elections when the MPs of this party left SMER-SD, so far it published only program theses that the electoral manifesto will be based on. According to this document, the party's “policy is about MAN! WE ARE THE VOICE OF PEOPLE!”. “The basis of a successful party must be a clear, legible, predictable and value-based program.”⁵

⁴ Smer-SD. „Zodpovedný program“ (Responsible Program) <https://www.strana-smer.sk/program>

⁵ HLAS-SD Program Manifesto: <https://strana-hlas.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SME-HLASOM-EUDÍ.pdf>

Political Parties Not Present in the National Parliament

The other three interviews were conducted with members of parties that are not represented in the Slovak Parliament. Two of them (Progressive Slovakia and KDH - Christian-Democratic Movement) are, however, represented in the European Parliament.

Progressive Slovakia

Branislav Tichy, the secretary general of Progressive Slovakia, similarly to Kmec, regards as populist two coalition parties OLaNO and Sme rodina. What makes them populist is in Tichy's opinion that they do not possess any clear ideology. Like other parties, they follow contemporary public emotions, popular demand. One example of a populist policy is to deliver 25,000 new state-sponsored apartments as declared by Sme rodina. Progressive Slovakia had such a promise too, but with a more realistic goal - to deliver 5,000-7,000 flats annually. In order to confront Sme rodina and prove this to be just an empty promise Progressive Slovakia provided its own calculations. In the case of OLaNO a rather populist feature of the electoral campaign was an online survey which contained various questions on policies for people to decide. Tichy, furthermore, admits that populist parties articulate legitimate and real concerns or demands as is a basic principle of populist politics. However, their solutions are not realistic, as shown in the example of Sme rodina and their solution to the housing crisis to build 25,000 rental apartments annually.

“There is no universal approach to confront such policies, it very much depends on context. Cooperating with such policies is a road to hell. On the other hand, when they raise important issues, it is important to offer realistic solutions in line with the ideology of the party. For example, the SaS political party did not promise any apartments to be built (PS disagrees here, some state-sponsored housing policy is needed) but it is its transparent ideological approach to this topic.”

The electoral strategy that was chosen by Progressive Slovakia in the last parliamentary elections in 2020 was data-driven policies. This, however, did not result in any seats for the coalition of Progressive Slovakia and party SPOLU (Together) which fell short of being elected to the Parliament (by ca 900 votes).

Christian Democratic Movement

Milan Kabina is the member of Presidium of KDH (Christian Democratic Movement) which also did not receive enough votes in the last parliamentary elections. He sees as “the most populist” parties those parties that are represented in the Parliament or in the government, namely Smer-SD, HLAS-SD, OLaNO, Sme rodina (We are a Family), but even the non-parliamentary party Progressive Slovakia. Whilst those parties present in the Parliament use a so-called hybrid form of hard populism, he describes Progressive Slovakia as using light populism due to their populist rhetoric that focuses largely on the liberal segment. From the governmental parties he defines as non-populist only Za ľudi (For the People), and from non-parliamentary parties Spolu (Together) and his own party. Kabina does not believe that Most-

Híd is a non-populist party due to the fact that it was a member of the governing coalition between 2016 and 2020, together with one of the populist parties SMER-SD, and thus it discredited itself with such cooperation. At the same time, he considers it difficult to define a populist party, due to the fact that all the parties are trying to focus on “popular” topics especially on social media. The environment is an important factor when it comes to populism and non-populism. On the EU level, there is, according to Kabina, a rather “positive impact”, meaning without a significant level of populism. That is visible according to him, especially on the example of Kotlebovci-LSNS that supported two candidates who became MEPs (one is no longer affiliated with the party but represents REPUBLIKA, and the other one was independent), and this presumably changed their attitudes.

On the national level, what makes the political parties populist is according to Kabina “that they all used the popularity of their leader to be even more populist and to gain more preferences, votes, seats and power. And they tend to promise everything that is needed to achieve these goals.” Their main strategy is to communicate negative emotions, hatred, to play with the emotions of the voters. Although they partially might articulate issues correctly, as in the case of OLaNO and its anti-corruption agenda, they also lack professionalism and the managerial skills necessary for public administration, political culture and the art to rule, as well as modern political thoughts.

Asked whether he believes that populists sometimes highlight and convey legitimate concerns related to current political, economic and social realities, he replies that this may be partly true, but it is far from enough. *„For example, like OLANO and their anti-corruption programme, which won the elections. But it was clear to most of us that fighting corruption is not enough, you need to be able to manage the state, the public administration, and we see that they cannot do that because they lack everything - professionalism, political culture and the art of governing, modern political thinking, etc.*

Parties that are not represented in the Parliament, such as KDH, struggle especially with how to be visible in the public discourse. One of the main communication channels of KDH currently are media at the local or regional levels, and a newly developed tool - a studio. Also the MEP for KDH communicates issues to the Parliament. *„It is extremely difficult because we are outside the Parliament, and the media do not listen to us. We're struggling with content and trying to be agile, but we can't make ourselves visible.* He believes that the best strategy to confront the populists is to respond with rationality and professionalism and a never-ending debate with the public. It also depends on the leader how strong he or she is in rhetoric to be able to positively influence the electorate and society without populism.

Most-Híd

Finally, Ábel Ravasz was the member of the Presidium of Most-Híd (The Bridge), a party that was a member of the governing coalition of parties between 2016-2020, but currently is not represented in the Parliament. He distinguishes four populist parties: parliamentary parties SMER-SD and Hlas-SD, governmental party OLaNO and the non-parliamentary party SNS (Slovak National Party). While he defines the former two as social populist parties, OLaNO is, as mentioned, according to him a so-called referendum populist party, and SNS is a nationalist populist party. MPs of these parties on national level can be described as populist, however, this is different when it comes to the MPs in the European Parliament. This might be due to the fact that the political dynamics are different on the national and on the European level. He thinks that the politics (as performed and perceived by candidates

from national political parties) is different in the European parliament. The MEPs are “not” welcome among their party colleagues, especially those who were running at top positions for the national parliament. These are seen as potential or real challengers for their party leaders. So it could seem that most of them are not populist in comparison with their national colleagues, but this is rather influenced by the fact that they were not welcome anymore so they were nominated to the EP seats. “The problem is to define them as populist because some of them use populist rhetoric to gain more preferences and some of them abuse it to gain power. I would rather divide them in the area of those who are pro-open society supporters and anti-open society. But overall all Slovak political parties are populist in their rhetoric.” He mostly refers to the parties currently in the Parliament, and the government coalition parties.

Yet he identifies a few parties that are not populist: “those who have strong value identity such as the KDH (Christian Democratic Movement) or economic identity like SaS (Freedom and Solidarity)”. Ethnic political parties on the national level also do not use populist rhetoric, but this changes on the regional level where they try to gain voters based on ethnicity.

He believes that populism in Slovakia has a negative connotation that is used to demonize the political opponent. In general, the goal of populist political parties is to gain political preferences and power through their populist rhetoric that targets the “common” people. Thus, the most typical messaging of these parties is: “we do it for the people”, “the people need it”, “our voters are calling for it”. Still, he also believes that there are topics raised by populist parties that can be positive such as the bill aiming to provide free lunches for primary school pupils presented by SMER-SD, that Ravasz sees as a possibility to create an inclusive society.

For Most-Hid the consensus or rather a compromise was crucial when dealing with the populists in the government which the party was a part of. However, this also came at a cost, as Most-Hid tolerated the populist rhetoric of SNS. What was, however, behind the unsuccessful elections of 2020, according to Ravasz, was that “the mainstream political parties are not able to communicate simply with symbols or stereotypes because it is not their identity to degrade their position and their vision for success.” Since Most-Hid has no seats in the Parliament it also struggles with visibility, similarly to KDH (that, as mentioned, is represented in the European Parliament).

Conclusions: the electoral and communicative strategies of non-populist parties to counter populist parties in Slovakia

In conclusion, non-populist parties in Slovakia that gained no seats in the Parliament in the last national elections clearly struggle with how to communicate their programme, critical feedback to governmental policies or political and policy ideas in general. They are less visible and lack access to traditional media. Apparently, social media and other communication means are helpful but not always sufficient communication tools. Although ideas and policies of populist parties are seen rather negatively by non-populist parties, some topics and issues that are communicated by them are apparently identified correctly, they are pressing political issues that resonate even with non-populists. On the European level there is no impact of populism perceived by the interviewed politicians, or rather there is a lack of interest in, or detailed knowledge about European politics that is an issue in general.

For non-parliamentary parties that are represented in the European Parliament, this way might be, however, the only channel that gives them currently any relevance in politics at the national level.

Among this sample, there is only one party that is present in the Parliament. It is Hlas-SD which tries to communicate to the voters that its policy solutions are realistic, that they present a real responsible change and have a real program. Ironically, this party is also considered as populist by other clearly non-populist parties such as KDH and Most-Hid.

Asked what the best strategy to choose when confronting populists is, Peter Kmec said it is best to compete with them with a realistic program and to constantly explain to voters the risks associated with voting for populists. Branislav Tichý replied that against exaggerated populist promises, it is important to offer alternative realistic solutions backed by hard data. According to Milan Kabina, the best strategy to confront populists is to respond with rationality and professionalism and never stop discussing with the public. Ábel Ravasz, for his part, said that the key to dealing with the current populists is consensus or a compromise and support for the good laws they propose, such as free lunches for primary school pupils. Most of our respondents, except for Milan Kabina, agreed that populist parties sometimes actually express and try to address legitimate concerns and issues related to the current political, economic or social situation in the country. Branislav Tichý warns, however, that populist solutions are often exaggerated and unrealistic, such as Sme rodina's promise to build 25 000 new state rental flats annually. Milan Kabina points out that it is not enough to have an anti-corruption programme that wins elections, as in the case of OĽANO, but one must also be able to manage the state or public administration.

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