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## **Task 5.2. Populist governance and policies in central governments led by populist parties**

### **1. Introduction**

After the parliamentary elections in 2016, the government was formed by the social democratic party *Smer-SD (Direction -Social Democracy)*<sup>2</sup>, the (self-defined) national, centre-right conservative *Slovak National Party (SNS)*<sup>3</sup> and *Most-Híd (the Bridge)*, the liberal “civic” party of ethnic minorities, with an emphasis on the Hungarian minority.<sup>4</sup>

In fact there were two rather competing political parties in the government: social democracy *Smer-SD* introduced social measures and minimum wage upgrades mostly through the Cabinet legislative initiatives (which increased public spending) and some long-term pro-business measures such as de-bureaucratisation packages (to be discussed later), while SNS managed to pass tax breaks for SMEs and other short-term and mid-term pro-business measures (which reduced public revenues) as well as competed in proposing policy measures aimed at employees, pensioners and families (which also increased public spending and debt). *Smer-SD* for most of the period was rather conservative in governmental spending, in an

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2 <https://www.strana-smer.sk/>, self-defined as „a standard leftist party that enforces strong role of the state in economy and responsibility of the society for protection of vulnerable groups of inhabitants”.

3 See Definícia SNS (SNS Self-Positioning), <https://www.sns.sk/o-nas/profil/>

4 See <https://www.most-hid.sk/sk/o-strane>, it is based on „principles of civic equality and cooperation, and the power of community”,

attempt to show fiscal responsibility. Thus, although it showed occasionally some populist rhetoric, features and initiatives (especially before the general elections), it could not be identified as full-blown populist party. This, however, cannot be said about SNS. In contrast to these parties, *Most-Híd* represented a moderate, clearly anti-populist part of the government.

From March 2016 to March 2018 the government was headed by the Prime minister Robert Fico (*Smer-SD*). After a series of public protests related to the murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak, Fico was replaced as PM by his party deputy, Peter Pellegrini, who served as PM from March 2018 to March 2020, when Smer-SD could not find coalition partners after the general elections, to form a new government. It should be mentioned that SNS fared poorly in February 2020 Parliamentary elections, barely passing the 3% threshold that qualified it for state contributions but not for any seat in the Parliament.

## 2. Methodology

We were asked to explore three policy fields as defined above with focus on these normative, partly political science based indicators:

**Policy Content:** a) Ideological heterogeneity and chameleonic flexibility, b) heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms, c) reflecting majoritarian preferences, d) hostility against unpopular minorities and radical and paradigmatic policy reforms.

**Policy Process:** (a) Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto players, (b) Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors, (c) Direct communication with the electorate.

**Policy Discourse:** (a) Extensive use of discursive governance, (b) Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing and (c) Dominance of Manichean discourses.

The sources used were official governmental documents and analysis, including outputs of analytical departments of the Government and ministries, commentaries by analysts, media reports. For family policies, we checked materials available on the website of the Parliament, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, stakeholders' body (Board of Economic and Social Consensus) as well as SNS website. We covered the last term of the Parliament (2016-February 2020). The structure of the report follows suggested outline.

We contacted representatives of SNS for economy and family policy (there was no official party expert for criminal justice policy), but there was either only initial reaction, or no reaction at all. Moreover, we contacted stakeholders in economic and family policies via email communication, but there was only limited feedback again (about five replies from about two dozens contacted). In particular, one impatient and uncooperative stakeholder/lobby group representative complained about our research project and our interpretation of their communication approach, to the Commission. Here we have found little support from the project coordinator who actually fully ignored absurd claims of the stakeholder about the project. We could not disagree more, and we found this approach as discouraging in doing in-depth research.

We also utilised own summary produced by SNS in which it presented its four-years achievements (see Table 1). It should be pointed here that SNS actually produced quite many policy initiatives, so we had to be selective here - also considering allocated limited size of this contribution. Our selection criteria included controversial policies that could be seen as

populist. Each chapter was initially drafted by an expert in the field, and then checked by external or internal assessors, and finally analytically interpreted and finalised by the key author.

It turned out that congruence analysis section does not provide a relevant picture through identified indicators about the party policies. Therefore, we had to expand the congruence analysis section.

**Table 1: SNS Summary of Four-Years Achievements**




Source: <https://odpocet.sns.sk/>

# My zmeny nesľubujeme, my ich robíme!

## Zvyšujeme mzdy a sociálne istoty občanov (presadili sme)

 Platy v školstve o 36%	 13. a 14. plat bez daní a odvodov	 Stabilizačné pôžičky študentom	 Rast minimálnych dôchodkov o 55 EUR
 Platy vojakov o 20%	 Rekreačné a športové poukazy	 25 dní dovolenky pre mladých rodičov s deťmi	 Garancia minimálnej mzdy štátnych zamestnancov
 Platy štátnych lešníkov o 20 %	 Príspevok deťom na školské pomôcky	 Zrušenie predaja cez sviatky	 Zníženie odpisov pre podnikové byty na 6 rokov

## Znižujeme dane, odvody a poplatky (presadili sme)

 Zníženie dane z príjmu pre malých a stredných podnikateľov na 15 %	 Zníženie DPH na periodickú tlač na 10 %	 Zrušenie daňových licencií	 Zníženie DPH na zdravé potraviny na 10 %
 Zvýšenie paušálnych výdavkov pre živnostníkov na 60 %	 Zníženie DPH na ubytovacie služby na 10 %	 Zrušenie koncesionárskych poplatkov pre dôchodcov	 Zrušenie diskriminácie zamestnancov verejnej správy v oblasti odmeňovania

## Štát nie je zlý hospodár (stabilizovali sme štátne podniky)

Slovenský pozemkový fond ✔ zisk	Lesy SR ✔ zisk	LPM Ulič ✔ zisk	Letecké opravovne Trenčín ✔ zisk	Agrokomplex ✔ zisk	Štátne závodisko ✔ zisk	Národný žrebčín ✔ zisk
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\*V roku 2016 noví manažéri prevzali niektoré štátne podniky a spoločnosti s problémami, nízkymi mzdami, investičnými a finančnými dlhmi, niektoré dokonca v štrajkovej pohotovosti...

Podarilo sa nám ich stabilizovať, rozvíjať, zvyšovať predaj, mzdy a sociálne výhody zamestnancov.



Voľte č.  
**9**

[www.sns2020.sk](http://www.sns2020.sk)



## 2. Populist Governance and Policy Making

It should be mentioned that some policies were actually not only in line with the Government Manifesto,<sup>5</sup> but also were generally seen as needed and beneficial to a particular industry or other sector or stakeholders. In other words, although overall *SNS* policies, could be seen as populist, a more detailed analysis shows a bit more complex assessment is needed.

### 2.1. Economic Policy

*SNS* party run in both governments three ministries: Ministry of Agriculture and Countryside Development<sup>6</sup>, Ministry of Education, Research, Science and Sport<sup>7</sup>, and the Ministry of Defence<sup>8</sup>. Thus, direct economic agenda could be seen as limited topic during the governmental term. However, as mentioned, *SNS* was in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture and Countryside Development. This included a big “Integrated Regional Operation Programme”.<sup>9</sup> In addition, this sector included the Agricultural Paying Agency with a lot of subsidies directly to companies.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport managed a great deal of money (Operation Programme Research and Development) that provided subsidies directly to companies.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, we contextualise in this part by and large general economic policies of the government.

Nonetheless, the chairman of the *SNS* party was Andrej Danko who firmly controlled the party; he served as a Speaker of the Parliament at the same time. His sometimes peculiar ideas translated into the party’s economic policy, too.

A key aim of the government’s economic policies was to reduce social and regional disparities. The regional policy aimed to create new jobs in the less developed regions (20 regions out of 79 regions) and to build or improve local infrastructure. The development instruments included support for the social economy through a combination of grants and financial instruments such as regional contributions, cohesion and regional funds provided by the EU, support for the social micro-enterprises and foreign investment. The results were overall not seen as successful with the exception of their possible positive contribution to lower unemployment levels (UV-29886/2019, p. 29). However, this result could be also caused by general economic boom in the country and the EU in general. The key strategies were not properly coordinated, according to government’s own assessment (*Aktualizácia*, no

5 See Manifesto of the Government of Slovak Republic (2016). <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/12485/Programov%C3%A9+vyhl%C3%A1senie+vl%C3%A1dy.pdf>

6 <https://www.mpsr.sk/en/>

7 <https://www.minedu.sk/about-the-ministry/>

8 <https://www.mosr.sk/mo-sr-en/>

9 See <https://www.mpsr.sk/index.php?navID=47&sID=67&navID2=1123>

10 See <https://www.apa.sk/en/>

11 See <https://www.minedu.sk/operacny-program-vyskum-a-vyvoj-verzia-30/>

date, p.172). In short, regional development policy could be seen by and large as unsuccessful. After double-checking with the authorities, there was just recommendation to check additional materials and acknowledged need for an updated strategy.<sup>12</sup> It is worthy to note that although this policy area was rather important for further economic and social development of Slovakia, SNS apparently participated very little in it.

The level of unemployment was decreased from more than 10% to about 5% during the governmental period. That was mostly due to the global economic growth, and partially can be seen as a result of supporting foreign direct investment and reducing various tax and administrative burdens for SMEs in Slovakia, too. The unemployment in some regions (districts) of western Slovakia reached as low as 3% (which could be considered the natural rate of unemployment; some big plants there had even to recruit workers from abroad). In less developed regions unemployment was reduced from more than 20% to around 10%.

Positive results were reflected in the increase of both nominal and real wages. Measures such as raising the minimum wage, night shifts allowances, introducing the 13th and 14th salaries (to a certain level tax and social and health costs free, on initiative by SNS, Apolen, 2017), and gradually increasing the wages of teachers and civil service employees also contributed to the increasing standard of living. However, wage increase did not correlate with productivity (ISA, 2019).

### 2.1.1. Policy Content

The substance of criticism of economic policy by the media and other stakeholders, including by a minor coalition partner *Most-Híd*,<sup>13</sup> was a lack of conceptual approach to policy, and replacing policy aimed at increasing income with social policy measures. However, it is true that the government continuously increased minimum wage limits during its term. In fact, as mentioned, there was increasing gap between labour costs and labour productivity since 2017 (ISA, 2019). This is an important indicator that puts discussed policy measures within transparent macro-economic context.

It should be mentioned that “Social packages” (*ad hoc* announced sets of policy measures) introduced during the previous period of *Smer-SD* single government were labelled by the liberal media and the opposition as populist measures.<sup>14</sup> However, also some partners from tripartite criticised “social packages”, and especially those welfare measures initiated by SNS, as “non-systematic” measures that made work of businesses more difficult.<sup>15</sup>

The government has also gradually adopted measures to reduce administrative burdens for entrepreneurs or to substantially cut levies or taxes. SNS party in particular claimed being

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12 RE: Hodnotenie regionálneho rozvoja pre EK, 2020-04-23 18:22 Od: Attila Tóth  
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13 See TASR (16.06.2019 ), Bugár hovorí o menšom sociálnom balíku, Sulík o zoštiehľovaní štátu, <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/515985-bugar-hovori-o-mensom-socialnom-baliku-sulik-o-zostihlovani-statu/>

14 See e.g. TASR 07.05.2019 Koaličné balíčky nazval Sulík ekonomickou vlastizradou, <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/511275-koalicne-balicky-nazval-sulik-vlastizradou/>

15 See AZZZ SR (2019), Sociálne balíčky & štátny rozpočet na rok 2020, <https://www.azzz.sk/2019/10/socialne-balicky-statny-rozpocet-na-rok-2020/>

behind initiatives in this area. The *SNS* party proposed and got approved in Parliament in cooperation with *Smer-SD* to abolish tax licences for companies, increased general tax-free lump-sums on expenditures for self-employed entrepreneurs (such as barbers, tailors, etc), lowered income tax for self-employed entrepreneurs (from 19% to 15% with total turnover up to 100,000 eur annually), and lowered income tax from 21% to 15% for SMEs with total turnover up to 100,000 eur annually. František Palko, head of the Institute of Economy Policy, labelled these policy proposals as “populist” and “dangerous political marketing”. These proposals were against the original governmental plan to have a balanced state budget (Palko, 2019). A lump sum tax-free increase was called as “populist” by Juraj Droba (2019), the head of self-governing region.

The consolidation of public finances was initially a priority in budgetary policy. The government committed itself to strengthening respecting budgetary discipline and achieving a balanced budget by 2020. The government was close to reaching a balanced budget as early as 2019, but failed here (deficit around 1% of GDP), because it adopted costly social and tax measures towards the end of its term. Moreover, a strong criticism had been raised against some allegedly overpriced government projects, especially of those related to the procurement of both IT and military systems (in the sector of *SNS*'s managed defence ministry). Media and political opposition spoke about corruption. For all these reasons, the balanced budget was unrealistic, and neither for 2020 year was such budget approved, although the government originally had promised it in its 2016 Manifesto. *SNS* in particular did not support responsible budgetary policy, although there was a state secretary representing *SNS* at the ministry of finance.

**In summary, there was not that much ideological heterogeneity and chameleonic flexibility in both the overall government economic policies, and *SNS* economic policies in particular. *SNS* policies were rather aimed at increasing the income or reducing costs for almost anyone and, as a result, decreasing state budget resources/increasing long-term debt. There were by and large apparently no long-term considerations either about positive or negative impacts of these policy measures. It is true that *SNS* supported all key segments of population and local business in general, with some specific preferences.**

The government dominated by *Smer-SD* had followed largely on economic policy from previous term of *Smer-SD* government (2012-2016).<sup>16</sup> As partially already suggested, the key principles of the Government 2016 Manifesto in economy were aimed at lowering social and regional disparities, reducing unemployment (100,000 new jobs and unemployment below 10%), protection and support for local SMEs, reducing bureaucratic regulations, sound budgetary policies (balanced budget by 2020). This should be based on strategic plan coordinated with stakeholders, including “Industry 4.0” and Strategy for research and innovations for Intelligent Specialisation RIS3.<sup>17</sup>

**Thus, there were no typical heterodox policy elements included – at least not such that could be seen as challenging mainstream policy paradigms.**

The Government's aims included reducing corporate income tax to 21% and reviewing the possibility of further tax reductions annually, abolishing tax license (the minimum tax introduced as a tool against the “creative accounting” - tax evasion) for the tax period starting

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16 See <https://www.vlada.gov.sk//programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-sr-na-roky-2012-2016/>, see also <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/7179.pdf>

17 See <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20137472/programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-slovenskej-republiky-kompletne-znienie.html>

from 2018, increasing lump-sum spending limits for self-employed person (tradesmen), continuation of the application of special contributions and taxes in the regulated sectors of the economy, with the possibility of extending them to other sectors, reviewing tax and accounting legislation to encourage investment.

As possibly populist measure - which faced some criticism of some stakeholders while others supported it - was the abolition of sales in stores during state holidays (15 days during the year) since mid of 2017. This policy measure was initiated by Andrej Danko.

Similarly, a ban on sales on Sundays, was raised by SNS chairman Andrej Danko in 2016<sup>18</sup>, although SNS had preferred this policy years earlier<sup>19</sup> and this proposal was supported by opposition movement OĽaNO in the early 2017 (Čimová, 2018) as well as supported by the trade unions and some concerned businesses as early as in 2015 (Čobejová, 2020), while the *Christian Democratic Movement* proposed this measure in the Parliament already in 2014.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the parliament did not approve a ban on sales on Sundays in 2017.

As a more populist step can be seen the abolition of fees for public television and radio (RTVS) – in fact very low amount – for seniors (this was only € 2.32 per month - for other citizens the rate is still valid € 4.34). František Palko, the head of the Institute of Economy Policy, called this measure populist (as well as proposals to cut taxes for legal persons to 15% and to cut VAT for food and printed media to 10%), supported later on by *Smer-SD*, and claimed that it disregards expectations of worsening of macro-economic trends (Palko, 2019b).

As another possibly populist measure, introduced on an SNS initiative, can be seen the introduction of an oil-fuel subsidy for farmers (“green” oil-fuel). This measure did exist in the past but was abolished because often it was cheated on. During discussion on how to finance this measure (as well as to promote local agricultural products), SNS chair Danko mentioned possibility to find additional resources for this subsidy in raising a special tax on retail chains of supermarkets (Onuferová, 2018a). This new idea was labelled as a populist measure by František Palko (2019a).<sup>21</sup> This policy measure has been stopped by the European Commission that issued a “preventive measure”.<sup>22</sup>

18 TASR (2016, November 26), SNS je za zákaz práce v nedeľu, treba rešpektovať právo na oddych (SNS supports ban on Sunday Shopping), [https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/sns-je-za-zakaz-prace-v-nedelu-treba/230280-clanok.html?combinedGlobalTab\\_zamestnajsja=1](https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/sns-je-za-zakaz-prace-v-nedelu-treba/230280-clanok.html?combinedGlobalTab_zamestnajsja=1)

19 SNS je za zákaz práce v nedeľu, hovorí o otroctve (SNS supports Sunday work ban, it is talking about slavery) (26.11.2016 12:30), <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/393863/sns-je-za-zakaz-prace-v-nedelu-hovori-o-otroctve/>

20 <https://www.topky.sk/cl/100535/1409843/VIDEO-Hlina-brutalne-nalozil--Poliacikovi-z-SaS--Berie-3-000-a-povie-bye-bye--to-je-sen->

21 Tlačová správa Inštitútu hospodárskej politiky, n.o. ku schváleniu osobitného odvodu z obratu obchodných reťazcov, (Press release of the Institute of Economy Policy on passing a special payment from turnover of food retail chains), 10. december 2018, [http://www.ihp.sk/tlacovespravy/20181210-TS-IHP-odvod\\_z\\_retazcov.pdf](http://www.ihp.sk/tlacovespravy/20181210-TS-IHP-odvod_z_retazcov.pdf)

22 SNS (2019, April 2). Európska komisia pozastavuje „Odvod z reťazcov“. Lobisti reťazcov mali informáciu už mesiac a pol dopredu, <https://www.sns.sk/europska-komisia-pozastavuje-odvod-z-retazcov-lobisti-retazcov-mali-informaciu-uz-mesiac-a-pol-dopredu/>



Perhaps in a similar vein/spirit to SNS ideology, the wages of soldiers were increased by 20%.

Conversely, raising teachers' wages, an idea appropriated by SNS, was not quite populist but rather inevitable step, because teachers' wages were for a long time below the average wage in the economy. Teachers went on strike before the 2016 election, and were still in the position to call another strike. Their salaries have been increased by 36% in successive steps and, in addition, the starting salaries of junior teachers have been increased by 10%. Again, the topic of salaries of teachers has been put on agenda maybe for 15 years. Thus, SNS just utilised others' ideas, it was not an original idea of SNS. Nonetheless, this was certainly future looking policy measure with some populist motivation behind (SNS managed Ministry of Education).

We examined context and impact of one policy proposal in detail, showing relative ambiguity of what can be seen by some as a populist measure but at the same time having quite reasonable aims and little, if any negative impact, and overall contributing to general welfare. This is related to contribution to leisure time/holidays for employees (costs to be reimbursed by employers) and invested locally (Tourism Industry). This proposal was initiated by SNS MPs in 2018. However, originally it was introduced already in the Governmental Strategy in Support of Tourism/Hospitality Industry during *Smer-SD* government (2012-2016) with planned implementation in 2020. The new SNS plan was to reimburse 55% of real costs (maximum 275 EUR annually) spent on local holidays and related leisure activities by companies with more than 50 employees. The trade unions welcomed this proposal, representatives of employers were against this policy measure. Nonetheless, the Parliament approved this change of law supporting local tourism, coming into effect in January 2019.<sup>23</sup>

However, it can be argued that this proposal was in general in line with the Government Manifesto. Specifically, the Government Manifesto stated: "The Government of Slovakia thus intends to support more intensively the development of the spa sector and will consider to implement tax incentives as well as special stimulus for its development" as well as with the aim: "to support SMEs in the ...holiday-travel-tourism sector".<sup>24</sup>

As per the assessment of the effectiveness of this policy measure, there was a reported increase in accommodation of local tourists by 18.5% in year on year comparison.<sup>25</sup> However, there was also increase of foreign tourist accommodations by 9% during the first half of 2019. Moreover, the long-term data show that year to year increase in local-based tourism is on average about 7%.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is difficult to separate the direct impact of this policy measure on domestic tourism industry.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, although experts agree that there was some positive impact of this policy measure on tourism industry, it is difficult to assess its exact scope (see

23 NR SR – Parlamentná tlač 1216 (Minutes of the Parliamentary Session), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&ID=1216>

24 Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky na roky 2016-2020 z perspektívy cestovného ruchu (Governmental Manifesto for 2016-2020 from a Perspective of Tourism Industry). <https://www.mindop.sk/ministerstvo-1/cestovny-ruch-7/informacie/cestovny-ruch>

25 [https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/products/informationmessages/inf\\_sprava\\_detail/53eef76d-d460-4266-9dd3-4b66418788dd/ut/p/z/1/AVJNe9owFPwtOfgovweSLdGbYFI-CpkEQgBdOjYW2AVbjq3Y4d9XzuSSmXz1UF0kzezu29UKFGxBFVGTSHSOBmSI6u\\_tOhb\\_v-FQMhz2JOJxTnM5-rW4mo5\\_98TqAzVuAuEle4\\_Re3o6XM9ZDFoD6nP8ACTS-sKVNYWfiOkpIfSJzSDRyXroDqbKnZum0KQuq6i5eNjU2p7eHICtDzxMSMJCJKwfhmSQJISwOAsZT3AhkqSTL\\_dZArtvoTdf5e3i4AdLouOrF8holCeMzxHFfBzgVE7WY8EdpSjpK-ATjZ3zwd\\_000OwaTLdwrroXuYMQ3-MOEGYgeri3G\\_3uY8-Fxwp54L12SAMKO0671eL0eLoZCOBdmUY2H5L21GzP4-PSrpOTWHIs4Xi\\_vjVzZFFTIWzWomDrmTIP1Xut6bWlvUPDz1s29Y\\_GnM8a39veg\\_fo6Smdv7elqHM17mgF316LK4pU\\_GFnpu5vLr6Cw0IVZcl/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/](https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/products/informationmessages/inf_sprava_detail/53eef76d-d460-4266-9dd3-4b66418788dd/ut/p/z/1/AVJNe9owFPwtOfgovweSLdGbYFI-CpkEQgBdOjYW2AVbjq3Y4d9XzuSSmXz1UF0kzezu29UKFGxBFVGTSHSOBmSI6u_tOhb_v-FQMhz2JOJxTnM5-rW4mo5_98TqAzVuAuEle4_Re3o6XM9ZDFoD6nP8ACTS-sKVNYWfiOkpIfSJzSDRyXroDqbKnZum0KQuq6i5eNjU2p7eHICtDzxMSMJCJKwfhmSQJISwOAsZT3AhkqSTL_dZArtvoTdf5e3i4AdLouOrF8holCeMzxHFfBzgVE7WY8EdpSjpK-ATjZ3zwd_000OwaTLdwrroXuYMQ3-MOEGYgeri3G_3uY8-Fxwp54L12SAMKO0671eL0eLoZCOBdmUY2H5L21GzP4-PSrpOTWHIs4Xi_vjVzZFFTIWzWomDrmTIP1Xut6bWlvUPDz1s29Y_GnM8a39veg_fo6Smdv7elqHM17mgF316LK4pU_GFnpu5vLr6Cw0IVZcl/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/)

NČ, 28 January 2020, pp.12-13). It may be estimated as 10% net contribution to the increase of local tourism which is a significant contribution.

In general, it seems that this policy measure was quite popular among employees. Moreover, it is difficult to assess it as a purely populist measure. WEF comparison showed that Slovakia was the least competitive country in tourism business within the EU member states.<sup>28</sup>

As a follow up, *SNS* MPs proposed to expand this policy measure, covering almost all of the economy (full-time, permanently employed workers and all employers). However, this proposal did not pass the third reading in the Parliament in late 2019.<sup>29</sup>

There was only an occasional negative criticism to the original policy measure. For example, liberal-right journalist Žitňanský (2020b) acknowledged the positive impact of this measure on the tourism industry, however, he criticized it as being an unsystematic measure that provided unfair market advantage to a selected group of entrepreneurs.

Among political parties, liberal *SaS* a populist anti-corruption *OLaNO* criticised this proposal as a mixture of populism and lobbyism. In their view, it would be more useful to lower compulsory social contributions (Onuferová, 2018b). After introducing this policy measure, there was some criticism that this measure obviously was used by employers during tripartite negotiations, arguing against providing more benefits in other areas (Onuferová, 2019).

As mentioned, the government was also formed by the *Most-Hid* party, which represented ethnic minorities in Slovakia, especially the Hungarian one, but also, for example, Roma and Ruthenian minorities. Therefore, the government set the goal of increasing the employment of the long-term unemployed people especially among the minorities. This included a large cohort of mainly the Roma ethnic group, located especially in less developed regions. A program was developed to support the least developed regions (districts) where employment and work-related education of Roma was one of the priorities. However, as mentioned, this did not work that well.

In the transport infrastructure, the government towards the end of its term fostered constructions of motorways and bridges also in the south of Slovakia, where the majority of ethnic Hungarians live.<sup>30</sup> That was somehow in contrast to previous governments policies in infrastructure.

**There was ambiguous position towards minorities.** On the one hand, *SNS* under Danko became pro-Israeli/pro-Jewish and neutral or friendly towards Hungary and ethnic

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26 Tatra Banka (2019). Dopad zavedenia rekreačných poukazov na cestovný ruch (The Impact of introducing Tourism Vouchers on Tourism Industry), <https://www.tatrabanka.sk/sk/blog/ekonomicke-analyzy/dopad-zavedenia-rekreačných-poukazov-cestovny-ruch/>

27 Ministry of Transport and Constuction (2019, August). Ubytovacia štatistika CR na Slovensku, (Accommodation Data of Tourism Industry in Slovakia), <https://www.mindop.sk/ministerstvo-1/cestovny-ruch-7/publikacie>

28 Zlacký, Vladimír (2019, November 4). Cestovný ruch na Slovensku: kto využije potenciál? (Tourism Industry in Slovakia: Who is going to benefit?), <https://dennikn.sk/1640049/cestovny-ruch-na-slovensku-kto-vyuzije-potencial/>

29 NR SR – Parlamentná tlač 1565 (Minutes from the Sessions of the Parliament), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&ID=1565>

Hungarians. On the other hand, *SNS* was strongly against immigrants and immigration, and especially against Islam as a religion, although it tried at times to enforce such policy in indirect way (as discussed in another part, there were measures taken regarding minimum membership among churches, as well as idea to ban wearing face-masks of Muslim women).

***SNS* also tacitly tolerated a new symbolic positive measure towards minorities**, and preferred by coalition partner, *Most-Híd*. This was introduction of bilingual names of railway stations (see Šnidl, 2017). *SNS* also did not enforce closing of some primary schools with low number of students. This abandoned plan was in line with an idea to make educational system more efficient.<sup>31</sup> Yet at the same time *SNS* did not support more ethnically-based minority education (Strempeková, 2019).

There were no fundamentally radical and paradigmatic policy reforms. Especially early *SNS* policy proposals could be seen as reaction to ongoing events, and/or of rather symbolic value (see, e.g. Kern, 2017). These included, e.g. an idea to launch “national airways” (not adopted, see Kern, 2019), although this promise was included into Manifesto of the Government<sup>32</sup>, or to label state railways as “national carrier” (adopted, although formally a link between *SNS* or Danko on the one hand, and the railway company or ministry of transport did not exist, see Poracký, 2017).

Commentators and stakeholders actually claimed that the government was unwilling to carry out radical but badly needed policy reforms (Melioris, 2020) that would increase state income (Schmögnerová, 2020). The key seriously needed policy reforms included keeping consistency of changes in legislation, fight against corruption and the rule of law (Krčméry, 2020). Also government’s own analysts saw a room for a more radical economic policies. For example, economy needed reforms of education, job market and efficient public administration (MF, 2019, for the last issue see Vašáková, Majláthová and Staňo, 2020). The Institute for Financial Policy argued that “Economic policy measures should focus on elimination of distortive regulations and support adoption of innovative technologies by domestic firms.”<sup>33</sup> If there was a (limited) professional discussion about radical and paradigmatic reforms, this could be seen rather positively, such as discussion raised by

30 See e.g. *Most-Híd* (2020, February 24). V Komárne sa začne modernizovať cesta na hranici, finalizujú sa práce aj na moste medzi Komárnom a Komáromom, <https://www.most-hid.sk/sk/v-komarne-sa-zacne-modernizovat-cesta-na-hranici-finalizuju-sa-prace-aj-na-moste-medzi-komarnom>, *Most-Híd* (2020, February 13). Rýchlostná cesta R7 je tesne pred svojim dokončením, <https://www.most-hid.sk/sk/rychlostna-cesta-r7-je-tesne-pred-svojim-dokoncenim>, *Most-Híd* (2020, February 6). Práce na podopretí Vážskeho mosta pokračujú, dokončuje sa aj nový most v Komárne, <https://www.most-hid.sk/sk/prace-na-podopreti-vazskeho-mosta-pokracuju-dokoncuje-sa-aj-novy-most-v-komarne>

31 See *Platy učiteľov sa od septembra zvýšia, málotriedky nezaniknú*. Minister školstva tak splnil dva záväzky z Programového vyhlásenia vlády na roky 2016 – 2020 (2016, June 16). <https://www.minedu.sk/platy-ucitelov-sa-od-septembra-zvysia-malotriedky-nezaniknu-minister-skolstva-tak-splnil-dva-zavazky-z-programoveho-vyhlasenia-vlady-na-roky-2016-2020/>

32 **Národný letecký dopravca**, <https://sluby.sme.sk/slub/340/narodny-letecky-dopravca>

33 IFP (2019, December), *Of firms and men* (December 2019), <https://www.mfsr.sk/en/finance/institute-financial-policy/policy-briefs/of-firms-men-december-2019.html>

governmental analysts about the introduction of binding multi-annual expenditure ceilings into Slovak budgetary practice.<sup>34</sup>

Within this context (radical and paradigmatic), and as presented at the Table 1 above, SNS economic proposals could be seen as relatively mild and less significant.

### 2.1.2. Policy Process

In the majority of cases, the governments in 2016-2020 did not circumvent the established institutions, but, on the contrary, involved many stakeholders and partners in its policy activities. Before the government approved important economic or social measure, such a proposal had usually been submitted to tripartite partners and, where relevant, also to other stakeholders. There was also usual process of inter-ministerial discussions on policy proposals (already in form of a draft law).<sup>35</sup>

Among tripartite members, there was only a single complaint that these materials have been submitted to tripartite at a short notice (HSR, 2018). Among about two dozen contacted stakeholders, only one stakeholder – Entrepreneurs' Association of Slovakia (PAS) - stated that the government fully ignored all stakeholders with dissenting opinion.<sup>36</sup> The organisation of major business stakeholders, Club 500 (companies with 500+ employees ) declared no interest to provide any information.<sup>37</sup> One can perhaps assume that both statements, as well as written evidence, support our analytical interpretation. Would there be any serious objections on the part of majority of stakeholders, they should not have any worries to express their opinion after the general elections held in March 2020. PAS statement was uniquely isolated, and without any further evidence to support its claim.

The Ministry of Economy prepared throughout 2017-2019 three “de-bureaucratisation” focused “packages”, and opened call for a fourth such set of measures, calling for inputs from all concerned.<sup>38</sup> This can also be seen as an attempt at open consultation process.

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**34** IFP (2018), Screwdriver of the Value for money projekt, <https://www.mfsr.sk/en/finance/institute-financial-policy/working-papers/nova-web-stranka.html>

35 See <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2019/661> P/2019/661 Návrh 1. akčného plánu pre realizáciu opatrení vyplývajúcich zo Stratégie hospodárskej politiky Slovenskej republiky do roku 2030 (Draft of the First Action Plan for Realisation of Measures Stemming from the Strategy of Economy Policy of Slovak Republic up to 2030), see also <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/23019/1>, see also TASR/Hnonline (2019, November 23). SNS zdvihla varovný prst. Koalícia podľa nej dostatočne nerokovala o rozpočte (SNS raised a warning finger: Coalition did not talk enough about the state budget plan), <https://finweb.hnonline.sk/ekonomika/2046536-sns-zdvihla-varovny-prst-koalicia-podla-nej-dostatočne-nerokovala-o-rozpocte>

36 E-mail from Peter Serina, CEO PAS, [pas@alianciapas.sk](mailto:pas@alianciapas.sk), 4/30/2020 1:57 PM

37 Email from Tibor Gregor, [office@klub500.sk](mailto:office@klub500.sk), April 22, 2020 4:56 PM

38 Check <https://www.mhsr.sk/podnikatelske-prostredie/opatrenia-na-zlepsenie-podnikatelskeho-prostredia/vyzva-na-zasielanie-podnetov-do-iv-antibyrokatickeho-balicka-opatreni>

Normally, any policies should reflect consensus as compiled in the Government Manifesto. This four-year policy blueprint should be then translated into the Government's (Cabinet) bills sent for discussion and approval by the Parliament. However, we have noticed that the draft bills have often been raised independently from the Government Manifesto by MPs (mostly based on party membership), and before coalition consensus was reached. Moreover, some bills were proposed sometimes jointly with MPs of a major coalition partner, *Smer-SD*, if its policy proposals did not pass in the Cabinet (see e.g. Apolen, 2019), or did not consider to discuss them first either in the Cabinet or at the Coalition Council, or with other state bodies (e.g. ministry of finance) or other stakeholders (Čimová, 2019, Petřík, 2019).<sup>39</sup>

In total, *SNS* claims that it has submitted and managed to adopt 77 bills or amendments to laws (41 proposed by its MPs and 36 originated from three ministries governed by the *SNS*) in the Parliament during 2016-2020 period.

As regards political actors, there were always lively debates in Slovak Parliament about suggested economic measures. There also was kept a tradition of submitting majority of regular draft proposals for a public-expert discussion (full-text available draft proposals online).<sup>40</sup> One could occasionally identify critical public reflection on these ideas by civic actors, too.<sup>41</sup> It was not that often that the government but rather the opposition used non-standard, even populist methods, either by submitting too ambitious economic and social proposals to parliament, not having consulted them with the state administration, or knowing that they could not be approved due to several "technical" shortcomings.

The government involved in its decision-making many stakeholders.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, there is analytical department at each ministry (with the exception of Ministry of foreign affairs), including at the Office of the government and the Office of vice-prime minister. In addition to these internal analytical services, state authorities utilised external analytical services in annual value of 32 million euro (Kišš, Haluš, Vass, 2020).

Moreover, in the economy sector, the Government-funded Slovak Business Agency provided analytical inputs. For example, survey among SMEs in August-September 2018 showed that only a quarter of SMEs assessed changes in business environment positively, while two thirds assessed these changes negatively. However, at the same time, attitude of the public sector towards SMEs was assessed positively by almost half of SMEs, and by only a third negatively

39 See also SITA, (21. mar 2019), Päť týždňov dovolenky s nami nikto nekonzultoval, sťažujú sa zamestnávateľia (The Five Weeks Holiday has not been consulted with us, the employers are complaining), <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22080613/pat-tyzdnov-dovolenky-s-nami-nikto-nekonzultoval-stazuju-sa-zamestnavateliam.html>, also Haraksin, Dárius, NOVINY.SK (10.10.2018), Osobitné odvody pre obchodné reťazce môžu byť klincom do rakvy, reagujú odborníci na návrh SNS (A special Tax for Food Retailers can be the final nail to the coffin, experts are commenting on SNS proposal), <https://www.noviny.sk/politika/377674-osobitne-odvody-pre-obchodne-retazce-mozu-byt-klincom-do-rakvy-reaguju-odbornici-na-navrh-sns>

40 See LP/2018/185 Návrh Stratégie hospodárskej politiky Slovenskej republiky do roku 2030, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2018/185>

41 Lucia Yar, Marián Koreň, Pavol Szalai and Zuzana Gabrižová (17. 4. 2018), Aké má byť Slovensko v roku 2030? Nová hospodárska stratégia nemá jasnú odpoveď <https://euractiv.sk/section/ekonomika-a-euro/news/ake-ma-byt-slovensko-v-roku-2030-nova-hospodarska-strategia-nema-jasnu-odpoved/>

42 See e.g. <http://lepsiezakony.sk/ppk-a-mpk-stanoviska/>

(SBA, 2019). In general, comparatively speaking, changes in business environment in Slovakia followed the general trends at European and world levels between 2009-2019 (PAS, 2019).

Government officials have communicated in a standard way with voters. They mainly used the form of press conferences after approving measures in the Cabinet or parliament. However, the mainstream media were often very critical of the government and its economic policy.

*SNS* in particular tried to communicate with the public – both through its three ministries and its chairman Andrej Danko, and less so, through its MPs. Danko attempted to use *SNS* Facebook page for his communication, but this backfired. For example, he called for a public Facebook plebiscite on his proposal to cancel e-vignettes for highways. Danko promised to follow the results of Facebook referendum, which he actually did.<sup>43</sup> (see further).

In general, it is perhaps unusual for a typical populist party that *SNS* actually promoted – comparatively – highest number of posts on Facebook that celebrated its achievements in the last four years (in period November 2019-untill election day) during election campaign before general elections 2020 (Zelenayová and Tóth, 2020). In other words, *SNS* prioritised to present its policy achievements, and not to appeal to negative emotions.

In general, the mainstream media were rather antagonistic towards *SNS*, and especially towards its leader who was considered picturesque and little dignified.

## 2.2. Criminal Justice Policy

This part examines criminal justice policy in Slovakia under the last R. Fico/P. Pellegrini governments (2016-2020). We have selected those changes in legislation that may not be seen as necessary or useful by lawyers and law enforcing bodies but rather reflect political agenda of political actors and their political marketing. This agenda was put into overall context, illustrating major challenges in enforcing justice by the policing authorities. The priority was given to assessment of the role of a junior coalition partner, *SNS*. It was assumed that this conservative, currently light nationalist/nativist and increasingly populist political party, could in its conservative right-wing orientation (Christian values, family values, patriotism) display tendency to populist policies targeting criminal justice.

First, this party under its chairman Andrej Danko (also being Speaker of the Parliament during period in question) moved away from hard nationalism towards soft patriotism and nativism in the last years. For example, its leader became one of the most radical opponents of radical right wing party Kotlebovci-ĽSNS.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Danko became fighting anti-semitism. At the same time, the party promised to guarantee “order in Roma settlements” in its 2020 electoral manifesto.

Second, this party, having a minor role in coalition government, had to build its own agenda. Thus, it was clear that some political and legal initiatives should have been expected

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**43** Andrej Danko: Dávam ľuďom na výber, ak chcú zrušenie diaľničných známok, nech za to zahlasujú v ankete na facebooku SNS (Andrej Danko: I give a choice to the people, if they prefer to abolish e-vignettes, then they should vote in a survey on FB), 21. 2. 2020, <https://www.sns.sk/andrej-danko-davam-ludom-na-vyber-ak-chcu-zrusenie-dialnicnych-znamok-nech-za-to-zahlasuju-v-ankete-na-facebooku-sns/>



as originating from this party. Since nationalism seemed to be replaced by a sort of patriotism and nativism, one could expect that “law and order” rhetoric would be more appropriate for this party. However, as it will be seen, this turned out to be only partially truth. In fact, the party seemed to produce mixture of welfare policies targeting pensioners, families, small entrepreneurs, farmers, as well as working people. Criminal justice policy proposals and affiliated rhetoric could be identified there, but apparently these were less important than social welfare and pro-business policies.

### 2.2.1. Policy Content

The most striking example of a kind populist criminal justice policy could be identified in the following legal initiative by a group of MPs for SNS. Since January 2020 an amendment to the Criminal Code<sup>45</sup> is effective. This amendment includes a new criminal offence “Promoting and propagating sexual pathological practices” (section 372a). This criminal offence sanctions the behaviour of a person, who promotes or publicly or in a public place propagates, approves, justifies, or strongly understates sexual intercourse with a child, relative, dead one, animal or other pathological sexual practices. Furthermore, it is a crime if a person promotes or publicly or on a public place propagates, approves, justifies, or strongly understates paedophilia, necrophilia or zoophilia. There is an obvious exception stated in section 3) - it is no criminal offence if action specified in previous paragraph is performed for the educational, medical or research purpose.

From the explanatory statement<sup>46</sup> it is clear, that the main reason of proposing this amendment was a series of articles (see Filo, 2019, Cuprik, 2019a, b) published in a quality liberal newspaper *SME*. These articles were criticized as neglecting or underestimating the dangerous aspects of pedophilia. These articles could be rightfully assessed as unprofessional, even naive, oversimplified contributions to a public debate, and there was a clear absence of in-depth knowledge from the area of pedophilia by the authors. However, this exceptional professional failure on the part of the media/journalists perhaps should not be seen as a reason for changing the Criminal Code, especially not by creating a new criminal offence which will criminalize this or similar comments in the future. It was an apparent instrumentalization of the issue of paedophilia using it a scaremongering rhetoric. It wasn't just an overreaction, but rather a larger ultraconservative / populist approach, to the insignificant stimulus and unnecessary ground for establishing new criminal offences.

It is worth mentioning that paragraph 1) and 2) of section 372a are in fact almost identical and it is unclear why paragraph 2) of section 372a contains only pedophilia, necrophilia and zoophilia. There is a full spectrum of sexual deviations such as sadism, gerontophilia, pyrophilia, merintophilia etc., and they are much more dangerous from the criminal – law

44 See, e.g. SNS (2019, May 12). Andrej Danko: Kotlebovi zrazu chutí EÚ. Už dnes nechce, aby z nej Slovensko vystúpilo. Predtým chcel, aby Slováci cestovali do susedných štátov s pasom. <https://www.sns.sk/andrej-danko-kotlebovi-zrazu-chuti-eu-uz-dnes-nechce-aby-z-nej-slovensko-vystupilo-predtym-chcel-aby-slovaci-cestovali-do-susednych-statov-s-pasom/>, SNS (2016, April 26), Andrej Danko: Urobím maximum, aby neštandardné a xenofóbne strany nefungovali, <https://www.sns.sk/andrej-danko-urobim-maximum-aby-nestandardne-a-xenofobne-strany-nefungovali/>

45 Proposal by the group of members of Parliament n. 1726. Available online: <<https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/zakon&MasterID=7575>>.

46 Proposal by the group of members of Parliament n. 1726. Available online: <<https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/zakon&MasterID=7575>>.

view than necrophilia and zoophilia. Thus, it appears that this was a hastily prepared draft law. The other controversial aspect, which can be seen in the text of this new criminal offence, is the possibility of an ambiguous interpretation of the words “strongly understates”. It is unclear when this becomes a criminal offence. It is unclear where is going to be the red line. It becomes rather subjective assessment and it will be in most cases part of legal-criminal dispute.

Yet SNS’s criminal justice policies were only partially populist. For example, Andrej Danko, the chair of SNS, promised while on official visit to Israel, in July 2018, to pass stricter penal legislation related to anti-Semitism.<sup>47</sup> Danko, as Speaker of the Parliament, organised a „regional seminar on hate speech“. Invited guests and speakers included Israeli politicians and diplomats. However, Šnidl (2018) pointed out that at least two close allies of SNS and Danko personally were involved in disseminating conspiracy theories, while Pataj (2018) went even further, arguing that one of these two, a personal advisor to Danko, was actually showing features of anti-Semitism. Be that as it may, Danko explicitly excluded from next coalition any party that would deny holocaust (in Čaplovič, 2019).

There was a comprehensive definition of anti-Semitism proposed by Danko in September 2018, and finally passed as „declaration“ by the Parliament on this issue towards the end of year 2018.<sup>48</sup> SNS also raised issue of regulating social media, with particular reference to anti-Semitism.<sup>49</sup> SNS also criticised controversial words of R. Fico, leader of another coalition party and of the Cabinet. Fico criticised a verdict of a court which sentenced to a fine an MP for *Kotlebovci-LSNS* party for his Anti-Roma statements broadcast in a local radio. Fico argued that although he “respected this verdict” yet an MP said about Roma what „almost all nation thinks, too“ and that courts often act under pressure of the media.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, SNS contributed to stopping governmental attempts at liberalisation of punishments for using lower doses of soft drugs in early 2018.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast, an interesting example of potentially useful but at the end unsuccessful attempt to amend Criminal Code and Criminal Proceeding Act was an Act on Enforcement Decisions and Administration of Seized Assets which was repeatedly withdrawn from hearing in parliament (after passing successfully through committees and two public votes in the Parliament) without reasonable explanation.<sup>52</sup><sup>53</sup> Clearly, draft legislation that could efficiently

47 <https://www.sns.sk/sialenci-ktori-v-plene-parlamentu-popieraju-holokaust-musia-skoncit/>

48 <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=udalosti/udalost&MasterID=54835>

49 <https://www.sns.sk/a-danko-je-nacase-aby-sa-doriesila-otazka-zodpovednosti-na-socialnych-sietach/>

50 TASR (2019, September 5), Koaliční partneri kritizujú Fica. SNS je prekvapená a v šoku z vyjadrení o Mazurekovi (Coalition partners criticize Fico. SNS is surprised and in shock from statements about Mazurek),

<https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2001470-koalicni-partneri-kritizuju-fica-sns-je-prekvapena-a-v-soku-z-vyjadreni-o-mazurekovi>

51 <https://www.sns.sk/sns-za-jedneho-jointa-nejde-nikto-do-vazenia/>

52 Proposal by the group of members of Parliament n. 1518. Available online <<https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/zakon&MasterID=7402>>.

53 <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/1229465/>



fight against money laundering was not that attractive to the government/parliamentary majority as minor, populist types of criminal justice legislation. However, not only SNS, but in fact majority of MPs did not vote in favour of passing this update of legislation. Maybe this issue reflected deeper problems with protection of human rights under the draft law.<sup>54</sup>

In conclusion, criminal justice policy was not the main policy tool of this party. Moreover, this policy included, perhaps surprisingly, fighting anti-Semitism. One can assume that this whole shift in policy preferences reflects personal features and values of chairman, Andrej Danko, rather than deep initial shift in values and attitudes of the party base itself.

### 2.2.2. Policy Discourse

There was not that much public or professional discourse specifically about criminal legislation suggested by SNS, with one exception, already discussed, but rather there was a long-term dominant general public discussion (by opposition parties and the media) about the fight against corruption and white-collar crimes that was often nicknamed as “captured state”. In part, this distortion of the main focus at pedophilia was caused by SNS – there were nine legislative initiatives submitted by SNS at the same time as legislation with focus on paedophilia that were discussed in October 2019.<sup>55</sup>

There was not much discussion about SNS legislative initiatives at a professional legal discourse either. Instead, some legal experts (Ševčík, 2019) criticised “improper” intervention of journalists (in particular, from newspapers *Sme* and *Denník N*), who allegedly from normatively incorrect (focused at trivial or unimportant issues) positions assessed candidates for members of the Constitutional Court. For example, Srholec (2019) discussed on example of a new change to whistleblower act a long-term problematic quality of criminal legislation.

If we focus on media/public discourse and SNS criminal justice policies, there was not much discussion either, with one exception. There was just a general discussion about journalistic articles on pedophilia published by a liberal newspaper that were also criticized by fellow (but not only) journalists (see. e.g. Struhárik, 2019). In support of this draft legislation, 21,000 signed a petition organised by the Alliance for the Family. On the contrary, the acting Minister of Justice G. Gál pointed that pedophilia was already defined as a crime in legislation.<sup>56</sup> Neither Constitutional Committee of the Parliament supported this draft legislation.<sup>57</sup>

It should be mentioned that some policy proposals of SNS did not materialise. For example, SNS suggested in 2016 (in reaction to a terrorist attack abroad) to pass in 2017 legislation banning Muslims women to cover their faces. However, this suggestion was framed by Danko in a rather ambiguous (not typical populist) way: “Not everyone who worships Islam is a terrorist. We can’t judge a person according to his religion or skin colour. However, we have

54 See <https://www.najpravo.sk/clanky/sak-je-neakceptovatelne-aby-mohol-policajt-zaistovat-ludom-majetok.html>

55 SITA, TASR, 27.09.2019, Na októbrovú schôdzu SNS predloží deväť návrhov zákonov <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/527335-na-schodzu-sns-predlozi-devat-navrhov-zakonov/>

56 SITA (2019, November 12), Význam pojmov pedofílie, nekrofilia a zoofília vyplýva podľa Gála zo zákona implicitne a nejaví sa ako vhodné definovať pojmy, ktoré sú už zaužívané praxou. <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/gal-nesuhlasi-s-navrhom-sns-o-pedof/429508-clanok.html>

57 SME (2019, November 19). Ústavnoprávny výbor odmietol novelu SNS o pedofílii, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22263788/ustavnopravny-vybor-odmietol-novelu-sns-o-pedofilii.html>

to pass security measures within Europe that will allow us to identify people who show inclination to radical forms of Islam.<sup>58</sup>

## 2.3. Family Policy

Family policy is defined as a set of state policies oriented to the welfare of children and the support of family as an institution or way of life. Most widely, family policies concern with demographic matters, the financial and other resources available to families, gender equality, the links between family life and employment, and the role and significance of family as a social organization. The most common constituent elements of family policy consist of cash benefits for families with children, child care and early education services, and leaves from employment for family-related purposes.<sup>59</sup>

Our primary interest was to analyse policy proposals of the *SNS*. Based on its previous policies and nativist (formerly nationalist) priorities, *SNS* should be interested in presenting this type of proposals that increase welfare of its target groups and may be seen by some as being populist.

### 2.3.1. Policy Content

It's important to mention here that we analyzed not only family policies per se, but also the policies *SNS* claimed to be in favour of families, or allegedly pro-family policies. For example, *SNS* mentioned in its summary of achievements in favour of families as the first issue "protection of traditional family" in early 2020 (*SNS*, no date).<sup>60</sup> This means that the great majority of MPs did not approve the so called Istanbul Convention<sup>61</sup>, with *SNS* nicknaming it its Electoral Manifesto as "society-damaging LGBT ideology".<sup>62</sup> In the same way, the second "achievement" declared by *SNS* as being in favour of families was seen "to stop sexual deviations – defining pedophilia as a crime" (discussed within criminal justice policy). Thus, both of the self-declared greatest "pro-family" policy measures prioritised by *SNS* were actually negatively framed.

58 TASR (2016, December 20). Danko: Po udalostiach v Berlíne sa musíme zjednotiť, *SNS* navrhne zákaz buriek (Danko: After Berlin events, we have to unite, *SNS* will propose a ban on wearing face masks for Muslim women), <https://www.postoj.sk/19851/danko-po-udalostiach-v-berline-sa-musime-zjednotit-sns-navrhne-zakaz-buriek>

59 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/family-policy>

60 [www.sns.sk](http://www.sns.sk)

61 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home?>

62 *SNS* (2019, April 7), R. Baláž: Istanbulský dohovor neberie ohľad na biologický rod človeka pri jeho narodení. Pretláča ho neoliberalná vetva v EÚ, <https://www.sns.sk/r-balaz-istanbulsky-dohovor-neberie-ohlada-na-biologicky-rod-cloveka-pri-jeho-narodenii-pretlaca-ho-neoliberalna-vetva-v-eu/>

Perhaps confusingly, *SNS* included into its “pro-family” policies also policies that were passed in favour of pensioners.

Moreover, not all family policies as proposed by *SNS* materialised. Perhaps the most typical example included multiple unsuccessful legislative attempts throughout the electoral period (not always initiated by *SNS*) to make abortions more strictly regulated, especially in 2019 year (the last year before general elections).<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps the most populist pro-family measure, supported by the Cabinet and its MPs (including *SNS*), could actually be seen passing the 13th pension in a fast-track procedure just days before the general elections in February 2020 (to be first time paid in November the same year – until then the Government delivered to the retired lower level and annually approved „Christmas contribution“). The legal emergency mode of passing this measure was justified as to prevent „humanitarian disaster“. At the same time, the parliament was supposed to discuss two more proposals: higher child allowances and the cancellation of highway payments (the latter suggested by *SNS* specifically). In the former case, only the low threshold of MPs present prevented to approve the fast-track proceeding in which the draft laws were to be discussed. The highway fees abolishment proposal was, actually, withdrew by *SNS*. The 13th pension payment was actually originally suggested by *SNS* and it was adopted by *Smer-SD*.

It should be mentioned that *SNS* reportedly found inspiration for its family „pillar“ presented during campaign before 2020 general elections in the *Fidesz* family policy (Šnidl, 2020c). There were more than 10 new family policy measures proposed. These included, for example, state subsidised loans for young couples, with partial deduction (after giving birth to two children) or full cancelation of the loan after delivering a third baby.

Many welfare measures initiated by MPs from *SNS*, sometimes jointly with *Smer-SD*, during 2016-2020 term, were seen as populist by opposition politicians (see, for example, TASR, 2020), by another coalition partner, *Most-Híd* (see Glob, 2020), or by experts (see Odkladal, 2019, SITA, 2018, TASR, 2017).

MPs for *SNS* proposed a contribution to children’s sport and leisure activities based on the amendment to the Labour Code. The measure should reimburse 55% of relevant costs (maximum 275 EUR annually) for sport and leisure activities of children of employed parents. The measure was approved by the Parliament, effective since January 2020.<sup>64</sup>

*SNS* MPs also proposed without prior discussion with coalition partners (Čimová, 2019) and the Parliament approved, changes in the Labour Code that extended the annual paid leave from four weeks to five weeks for parents under 33 years of age who permanently take care about a child. The employers did not like this proposal, however, trade unions welcomed the measure. Trade unions suggested that perhaps even better policies could be to cut down overtime work and increasing bonuses paid for overtime work and for night shifts (Čimová, 2019). The *SNS* proposal was approved with a large majority, effective since January 2020.<sup>65</sup>

63 See. eg. Návrh SNS na sprísnenie interrupcií neprešiel (The SNS Proposal to Make Interruption more Strict, Did not Pass), <https://www.zenyvmeste.sk/navrh-sns-na-sprisenie-interrupcii-nepresiel>

64 NR SR Parlamentná tlač (Minutes from the Sessions of the Parliament), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&ID=1479>

65 NR SR Parlamentná tlač 1630 (Minutes from the Session of the Parliament), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Page.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&ID=1630>

The MPs for both *Smer-SD* and *SNS* suggested to provide an allowance of 100 EUR to first year primary school pupils. This proposal was approved both by the government and Parliament and is effective since late 2019.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Policy Discourse

It is instructive to assess early opinions about *SNS* and its leader's communication and political abilities and popularity. Leaders play very important role in Slovak party politics (Kopeček, 2004). There was until social media expansion a consensus that dominant, usually "charismatic", leaders are typical for populist policies and populist parties, although it is unclear what was correlation and causation here (see, e.g. Barber, 2019). Apparently, "populism and leadership constitute phenomena that are both complementary and distinctive" (Viviani, 2017, 280). More specifically, "the leadership explains the chameleon-like nature of populism" (Soare, 2017, 142). Currently, there are populist leaders that can be better described as „provocateurs” or „drunken dinner guest” (Nai and Coma, 2019) or as „entertainers. Danko seemed, in retrospective, to belong to category (a light) „drunken dinner guest” - if at all.

Danko virtually monopolised discursive space of *SNS* (Kmet', 2018a, Mravec, 2018, Feriková, 2020). The only significant voices representing policies of *SNS* who managed to be heard in public spaces relatively frequently were three ministers who were not members of the party for most of the time. In 2016, Andrej Danko was the most popular politician and at the same time the least unpopular politician in opinion polls and was seen as a rising star of Slovak politics in 2016.<sup>67</sup> It is true that some observers raised some doubts about his long-term political future very early on, either due to poor rhetorical competencies (see, e.g. Choleva, 2016, Šimečka, 2017), or low ability to argue correctly in discussions (see e.g. Čapkovičová, 2016) or due to a lack of populist rhetoric and a lack of charisma (Kysel', 2016), due to a lacking ability to manage crisis communication, a lack of strategic thinking, poor advisors and abandoning "national" issues (Majchrák, 2017), or rather as a result of his political-communication failures due to a lack of experience with politics and emotionally-driven political decision-making (Vagovič, 2017).

It is interesting to note that Danko throughout 2017 with one exception (1 in 18), did not face any opponent other than a moderator in his public appearances in public debates (Kmet', 2018a). Moreover, in 2019, Danko was the second most often publicly speaking politician in major political discussion programmes in Slovakia (Feriková, 2020).

Nonetheless, or as a result, in the early 2020 (before general elections), Danko was seen as a tragicomic political figure. He became one of the most frequent object of jokes on two specialized portals – Zomri (Keep Calm and Die) and Cynická obluda (Cynical Monster).<sup>68</sup> There was published a funny book of his "selected ideas" (see Pavlovič, 2018) that became

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66 NR SR – Parlamentná tlač 1482 (Minutes from the Session of the Parliament), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&ID=1482>

67 TASR, 22.08.2016, 14:18, Pozrite sa, ktorí politici sú Slovákom najviac a najmenej sympaticí (Check which politicians are the most and least sympathetic\_, <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/813875-pozrite-sa-ktori-politici-su-slovakom-najviac-a-najmenej-sympatici>)

the second most bestselling book within a small publishing house.<sup>69</sup> It did not help much that he and *SNS* tried to make fun of themselves based on some of his communication failures (see Mikušovič 2019). In the early 2020, Danko became the second least trusted politician and the second from the bottom of the most trusted politicians (NČ, 4.5.2020, p.12).

#### **(a) Extensive use of discursive governance**

There was not much use of discursive governance. Rather, there was prevailing public presentation of ad hoc developed, or as response to ongoing events, policy ideas. Some of them materialised, some materialised in a modified way, and some simply did not materialise. As mentioned, an attempt by *SNS* chairman at discursive governance failed. The great majority of participants at this quasi opinion poll on *SNS* Facebook page voted in favour of keeping e-vignettes (see Folentová, 2020).

There was additional parody related to this quasi opinion poll. In response, a satirical (black humour) webpage Zomri (Keep Calm and Die) initiated public opinion poll on closing down *SNS*.<sup>70</sup> In this alternative poll (29,000 participants), almost a half more of the number of voters on original proposal by *SNS* (some 21,000 participants in total, with some 18,000 with negative votes), voted in favour of closing down *SNS*.

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68 See <https://cynickaobluda.sme.sk/2019/09/nesmejte-sa-dankovi.html>

69 See Artis Omnis (2019, February). [Silný Červenák, ale aj Kapitán Danko. Aké boli naše TOP knihy v roku 2018](https://artisomnis.sk/silny-cervenak-ale-aj-kapitan-danko-ake-boli-nase-top-knihy-v-roku-2018/) (Best selling Červenák, but also Captain Danko What were our top books in 2018 year), <https://artisomnis.sk/silny-cervenak-ale-aj-kapitan-danko-ake-boli-nase-top-knihy-v-roku-2018/>

70 [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2584988331780414&id=1729940727285183](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2584988331780414&id=1729940727285183)



**Chart:** Facebook page suggesting in public voting closing down SNS

In general, *SNS* discourse, including an attempt at discursive governance as represented by its chairman Andrej Danko, seemed to be rather series of more communication (Šnidl, 2020a) than (short-term) policy failures.

### **(b) Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing**

This way of communication was adopted by coalition parties, especially by *Smer-SD* and *SNS* in the economic field only in the election campaign in autumn/winter of 2019/2020. At that time, it was mainly related to the hastily passing legislation on selected costly social measures. At the end of February 2020, shortly before general elections, *Smer-SD* suddenly, in an extraordinary mode, passed through the Cabinet and subsequently through the parliament (at its extraordinary session) a set of rather costly measures in the social policy. *SNS* cooperated in bargain, for the third time, to discuss and effectively dismiss the Istanbul Convention (on womens' rights). *Smer-SD* managed to get through the Parliament two points from its 2020 election program - the thirteenth pension payment (to be paid in December 2020) and the thirteenth family allowance (to be paid for school kids needs in August 2020). Overall, 1.4 million people should be better-off by this measure. In addition, the total amount outside the approved public finance budget should be 442.2 mil. Euro.

The “clear majority” of 31 participating members of the Club of Experts in Economy (KEA) raised criticism on these measures.<sup>71</sup> Almost all opposition politicians and many journalists, e.g. Žitňanský (2020a) were highly critical especially of the thirteenth pension payment, calling it a “ticking bomb”.

The Parliament, based on Cabinet’s reversed decision<sup>72</sup>, unexpectedly did not vote on the abolition of motorway e-vignettes – in cost of € 50 per year (to be effective since 2021) in

71 See <https://e.dennikn.sk/minuta/1761782>, [http://ineko.sk/kea/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KEA\\_TS\\_Rozpocet\\_Text.pdf](http://ineko.sk/kea/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KEA_TS_Rozpocet_Text.pdf), Ekonomovia kritizujú vládou navrhované opatrenia tesne pred voľbami (Economists are Critical About Governmental Proposals shortly before General Elections), Press Release, February 20, 2020.



February 2020. This policy measure originally suggested by *SNS* could be seen as populist one. For example, Lubomír Palčák, head of the Transport Research Institute said that it would not help anyone. This critical opinion was supported by another two cited experts.<sup>73</sup> The official reasons for passing this policy (at an extraordinary session of the parliament) were “not completed highway network and (with the aim) to increase standard of living of citizens”.<sup>74</sup> There had been no public debate about this measure prior as it was raised by *SNS* and there was no public demand for it either.

In general, it appears that Manichean discourse was rather used by the political opposition (with occasional examples produced by then P.M. Robert Fico especially during large public protests in 2018). Manichean discourse of opposition was directed mainly to “captured state”, corruption and mismanagement in state institutions, government parties and towards several large procurement projects. It turned out later on that there was some substance in these allegations.<sup>75</sup> Yet the economy did not play a key role here – there was the successful economic development, when during all four years of the *Smer-SD – SNS – Most-Híd* coalition, GDP was growing at an average above 3% per annum and unemployment rates declined.

Rather than economy performance, it was captured state and corruption behind why this coalition have lost so badly the general elections (both *SNS* and *Most-Híd* did not even pass to the new Parliament), with the loudest critics of this misgovernance and especially of corruption and captured state, *OLaNO* movement (itself with strong populist rhetoric) became the main winners.

*SNS* in particular did not regularly use Manichean discourse, but rather confusing, blurred discourse. The chairman Danko occasionally used highly emotional communication rhetoric but this reflected his personal communication style and his personal conflicts with some opposition politicians and the media.

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72 Decision of the Cabinet No. 88 (2020, February 26), <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=476246>

73 SITA, TASR (12.02.2020 ), Budú diaľnice zadarmo? Nezmysel a zúfalstvo zabojovať o voliča, tvrdia experti (Will the highways be free of charge? Nonsense and desperate attempt to struggle for a voter, experts claim), <https://auto.pravda.sk/doprava/clanok/542195-navrh-zrusit-dialnicne-znamky-nezmysel-a-zufalstvo-zabojovat-o-volic-a-tvrdia-experti/>

74 <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=476036>, see also SNS (2020, February 12), A. Danko – Štát by nemal zdieľať ľudí za diaľničné známky, keď máme cesty ako zo stredoveku, <https://www.sns.sk/a-danko-stat-by-nemal-zdielat-ludi-za-dialnicne-znamky-ke-d-mame-cesty-ako-zo-stredoveku/>

75 See e.g. EP (2019, January 22). Draft report on the fact-finding mission to Slovakia 17-19 December 2018, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union Secretariat of the Committee on Budgetary Control, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014\\_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/CONT/DV/2019/01-28/Slovakia\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/CONT/DV/2019/01-28/Slovakia_EN.pdf), Is Slovakia still in the bosom of corruption?, (n.d), <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20788955/is-slovakia-still-in-the-bosom-of-corruption.html>, see also Školikay, 2018.

## 4. Congruence Analysis

### 4.1. Policy Content:

As regards “ideological heterogeneity and chameleonic flexibility”, *SNS* tried to show two faces - one contributing, doing something positive for the key stakeholders, as well as protecting the country and stakeholders against real or imagined dangers and threats. Ideological heterogeneity could be, perhaps, seen, within this context, as introducing both pro-family and pro-welfare measures, including pro-business measures, while at the same time promoting limited repressive or preventive policy measures.

Chameleonic flexibility could be, perhaps, seen, in replacing former enemies or dangers (typically, Hungary or local Hungarians) or lowering intensity of focus on “solving the issue of” problematic groups (previously typically or almost exclusively, Roma),<sup>76</sup> with new enemies or dangers: fighting possible US military bases, pedophiles (utilising an opportunity provided by the media, but also one case of (former) pedophile employed at a school), LGTB and “gender ideology” (utilising opportunity provided by international context), while also keeping on the agenda some relatively recent “enemies” or “dangers”: illegal migrants (utilising opportunity provided by international context), monopolies and multinationals. Moreover, there were still some old friends: Russia<sup>77</sup> (Danko was the only Speaker of the Parliament from the EU who celebrated V-Day in Russia in 2019, see Čaplovič, 2019 and Chovanec, 2019) and some Slavic nations, especially Serbia<sup>78</sup>, including Czechs, as well as a new friend: Israel. EU was seen more positively<sup>79</sup> than in the previous period (in 2012 Party Electoral Manifesto or in 2016 speeches<sup>80</sup>). However, one can argue that *SNS* or rather Danko

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76 See 2012 Electoral Manifesto, <https://slovenska-politika.webnode.sk/products/volebny-program-sns-k-marcovym-volbam-2012/>

77 See SNS (2019, June 25). R. Baláž: Rusi môžu opäť hlasovať v Rade Európy. Potvrdili sa tak slová nášho predsedu SNS Andreja Danka, že Rusko je veľmoc, ktorú nemožno ignorovať, <https://www.sns.sk/r-balaz-rusi-mozu-opat-hlasovat-v-rade-euro-py-potvrdili-sa-tak-slova-nasho-predsedu-sns-andreja-danka-ze-rusko-je-velmoc-ktoru-nemozno-ignorovat/>, SNS (2018, October 11), A. Danko: Naše členstvo v EÚ som nikdy nespochybňoval, je však falošné a neúprimné sa o sankciách klamať ďalej, <https://www.sns.sk/a-danko-nase-clenstvo-v-eu-som-nykdy-nespochybnoval-je-vsak-falosne-a-neuprimne-sa-o-sankciach-klamat-dalej/>

78 SNS (2018, June 6), A. Danko: Slovensko bude aj naďalej pokračovať v konzistentnej podpore politiky rozširovania EÚ, <https://www.sns.sk/a-danko-slovensko-bude-aj-nadalej-pokracovat-v-konzistentnej-podpore-politiky-rozsirovania-eu/>

79 See A. Danko – EÚ MÁ PRE NÁS VÝHODY (A. Danko – EÚ is in our favour), (2019, November 12). <https://www.sns.sk/a-danko-eu-ma-pre-nas-vyhody/>, SNS (2018, November 15), Andrej Danko: Nikto z nás nepochybuje o tom, že EÚ je tým najlepším projektom. Je však viac strategických vecí, na ktorých musíme zapracovať

80 SNS (2016, October 6), Andrej Danko: SNS žiadala reformu EÚ ako prvá, <https://www.sns.sk/andrej-danko-sns-ziadala-reformu-eu-ako-prva/>



just attempted to balance or expand geopolitical contacts. This could be seen in expansion of foreign contacts with China<sup>81</sup> and Central Asia.<sup>82</sup>

In case of LGTB, SNS claimed in the same statement to tolerate “all forms of diversity” but at the same time it was against “making equal couples other than a man and a woman, and in particular, SNS was against adoption of children by such couples.”<sup>83</sup> This could also be seen as a bit chameleonic position.

As regards “heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms, reflecting majoritarian preferences, and radical and paradigmatic policy reforms”, SNS on the one hand presented many policy innovations in economic policy and family policy that, however, did not challenge mainstream policy paradigms. Probably all these new policies have already been tried elsewhere. One exception was a special tax on retail chains of supermarkets. This policy measure was stopped on intervention of the European Commission. The overall challenge of policy measures could be seen in estimated high costs associated with some of these - primarily economic and pension reversed reform - policies. Moreover, there were no radical and paradigmatic policy reforms in economic policy, or criminal justice policy initiated by SNS, although these were badly needed. Those pro-family policy measures initiated by SNS could be certainly welcome, and, moreover, they again did not qualify as radical and paradigmatic policy reforms. However, an increase of wages for teachers – which was, however, long-term state strategic policy, by and large independent of initiatives of SNS - should be assessed positively.

Interestingly, both of the self-declared greatest “pro-family” policy measures prioritised by SNS were actually negatively framed.

As regards “hostility against unpopular minorities”, as partly described earlier, the SNS offered blurred image of its goals and achievements. On the one hand, it tacitly tolerated some positive policies towards Hungarian minority, while it even cherished Israel and fought anti-Semitism. On the other hand, it should be mentioned here (since selected policy areas did not cover this issue fully) that SNS party fought against “unregulated immigration” (effectively, in constitutional consensus with other parliamentary parties, blocking *Covenant of Marrakech*, “Islamisation of Slovakia” (indirectly, through passing stricter regulation of new religious communities) and as mentioned, fighting possible “US military bases in Slovakia”<sup>84</sup> (while at

81 TASR/Pravda (2019, August 6), Danko pozval predsedu čínskeho parlamentu na Slovensko, chce dobré vzťahy (Danko has invited a Speaker of the Chinese Parliament to Slovakia) <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/521660-danko-pozval-predsedu-cinskeho-parlamentu-na-slovensko-chce-dobre-vztahy/>

82 SNS (2019, September 24). Andrej Danko: Len dialóg je cesta ako bojovať so zlom, manipuláciou a egoizmom dnešnej doby (Andrej Danko: Only dialogue is a way to fight with the evil, manipulation and egoism of today), <https://www.sns.sk/andrej-danko-len-dialog-je-cesta-ako-bojovat-so-zlom-manipulaciou-a-egoizmom-dnesnej-doby/>

83 SNS (2018, June 13). A. Hrnko: Opäť zvolali do Bratislavy tzv. Dúhový pochod (A. Hrnko: They again called in to bratislava „A Raibow March), <https://www.sns.sk/a-hrnko-opat-zvolali-do-bratislavy-tzv-duhovy-pochod/>

84 TASR/Pravda (2019, march 13). Danko: Nikto neodmietol financie z USA, lebo žiadne ponúknuté neboli (Danko: No one has declined a money offer from the USA since none have been offered), <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/505310-danko-nikto-neodmietol-financie-z-usa-lebo-ziadne-ponuknute-neboli/>, but see also SITA/Pravda (2019, March 15), Danko v súvislosti so spoluprácou s USA uviedol viaceré nepresnosti, tvrdí rezort zahraničia (Danko has stated a few imprecise claims, as far as

the same time choosing by the Ministry of Defence under patronage of SNS F-16 jets from the USA instead of Swedish-British Gripen jets). These three issues seemed to be the new negative core of “patriotic” policies of SNS. These three issues were also reflected in the party’s electoral manifesto before 2020 general elections.

**In summary, economic, family and criminal justice policies of SNS are only partly congruent (and to different degree) with the suggested populist policy-making ideal type.**

**However, we can identify economic policies of SNS as almost fully populist, if we follow this definition:** *“The populist economic agenda is characterised by short-termism, the denial of intertemporal budget constraints, the failure to evaluate the pros and cons of different policy options as well as trade-offs between them. It often focuses on single and salient political issues, overemphasises negative aspects of international economic exchange and immigration, and blames foreigners or international institutions for economic difficulties. The populist economic agenda rejects compromise as well as checks and balances and favours simplistic solutions” (EEAG, 2017, 53).*

However, there is a caveat – SNS policies did not show full-blown (100%) populist economic policies. There was some consultation, some restraint, some were useful, and there were some failures to pass such policies, mostly due to coalition form of government.

#### **4.2. Policy Process:**

As regards “Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto players” and “Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors”, more than half of all legislative initiatives by SNS have been submitted by its MPs. This means that these measures did not follow regular legislative process. However, not all policy ideas and suggested measures by SNS materialised. Moreover, some initiatives have been submitted jointly with other coalition partner, and almost half of them have been submitted with backing of the Cabinet.

**In summary, policy process of SNS is partly congruent (or partly-incongruent) with the populist policy-process ideal type.**

#### **4.3. Policy Discourse:**

As regards “Extensive use of discursive governance” (implicit mechanisms of governance such as narratives, leitmotifs, and strategic metaphors in political language), “tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing” and “dominance of Manichean discourses” (seen things in black and white), there was not much use of discursive governance. Rather, there was prevailing public presentation of ad hoc developed, or as response to ongoing events, policy ideas. Some of them materialised, some materialised in a modified way, and some simply did not materialise. As mentioned, an attempt by SNS chairman at discursive governance failed, and in fact backfired.

Manichean discourse was rather typical of opposition (and then occasionally by Robert Fico) and was directed mainly to “captured state”, corruption and mismanagement in state institutions, government parties and towards several large procurement projects.

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cooperation with the USA is concerned, claims ministry of foreign affairs), <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/505569-danko-v-suvistlosti-so-spolupracou-s-usa-uviedol-viacero-nepresnosti-tvrdi-rezort-zahranicia/>

*SNS* in particular did not regularly use Manichean discourse, but rather confusing, blurred discourse. There were contradicting statements in Danko’s positions.<sup>85</sup> Sometimes, short-lived attempts at Manichean or highly emotional communication style were present. This was typical when *SNS* tried to put on agenda, or reacted to some controversial topics such as illegal migration (2016), terrorist attack abroad (2016), “gender ideology” (2018-2020), incorrect presentation of pedophilia in the newspaper (2019) or different quality of food in Western Europe and Eastern Europe (2017-2018). The chairman Danko occasionally used highly emotional communication style but this reflected his personal communication style and his personal conflicts with some opposition politicians and the media.

Neither chairman nor the *SNS* party were successful in attracting positive attention by the media and the public at large through these occasional emotional communication attempts. This failure was caused by multiple factors: poor and blurred communication abilities and messages, predominant liberal orientation of mainstream media, and competing political parties and their leaders that were more consistent and more “authentic” in their agenda of this type.

**In summary, policy discourse of SNS is by and large incongruent with the populist policy-discourse ideal type. However, the results are different if we focus only on three selected areas.**

**Table 2: Congruence Analysis**

	<b>Macroeconomic Policy</b>	<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	<b>Family Policy</b>
<b>Policy content</b>	Partly matching the ideal-type but almost fully matching other, more often used definition	Fully matching the ideal-type but little used	Partly, but only very little, matching the ideal-type
<b>Policy process</b>	Partly matching the ideal-type	Fully matching the ideal-type	Partly matching the ideal-type
<b>Policy discourse</b>	By and large incongruent with the ideal-type	Partly incongruent/ Partly matching the ideal-type	By and large incongruent with the ideal-type

**5. Discussion, Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

*SNS* policies, discourse and policy process were determined by a set of factors.

Firstly, it was the Manifesto of the Government. One can say that *SNS* by and large followed this Manifesto since the document allowed rather wide interpretation. However, there were some policy proposals that could be hardly identified in the Manifesto such as abolishing e-vignettes. Moreover, perhaps the most important promise – to reach and keep a balanced budget – was not a priority of *SNS*.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Danko populista SNS (2019, May 15). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TThqHuwGkc>

Secondly, *SNS* was in coalition government and there was a particular portfolio that *SNS* managed within the government. There were three ministries under exclusive *SNS* patronage (the deputy ministers from other parties played more or less formal or symbolic roles). Nonetheless, *SNS* managed to produce surprisingly a lot of interesting, but costly and mostly populist-looking policy proposals and initiatives in general, including the Ministry of Agriculture, while the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education, Research, Science and Sport could be seen as producing a rather negative image of *SNS* (because of corruption suspicions related to big procurement projects they administered). Moreover, chairman Danko also produced quite many policy proposals on his own, or with the help of his party fellows. One cannot say that *SNS* under his leadership was inactive. However, specific selection of topics to be analysed here (family policy, criminal justice policy and economic policy) did not allow full understanding of the scope of populism present in this particular case, although it is clear that *SNS* economic, family and criminal justice policies were already quite populist.

In general, a populist party is limited in its actions in coalition government.

The third and perhaps the most surprising aspect was the role of Andrej Danko, the party chairman. Danko played a very active role in transforming the party from a single ownership issue – nationalist party – into a more moderate, conservative, patriotic/nativist party still with some xenophobic features (against Islam and immigrants), while at the same time presenting it as pro-Jewish / pro-Israeli and anti-xenophobic party. However, the party remained too much represented by its chairman in the public arena and probably also internally (with lack of party internal democracy). As a result, this transformation (that could be welcome, actually) was undermined by some negative personal features and a lack of political communication competencies of Danko himself, and by many scandals that surrounded him and by him lead party and ministerial departments. The party and Danko himself became popular targets of the mainstream liberal media (PSM kept by and large a neutral profile, with some sources claiming that the PSM tried to support *SNS* in its coverage)<sup>86</sup> as well as of some portals devoted to sarcastic humour.

Finally, there were competing parties and leaders who managed to present “ownership” of some issues in a more authentic way. This actually worked in both ways – *SNS* also adopted some policy ideas originally suggested by other parties.

Clearly, Engler, Pytlas & Deegan-Krause (2019) offer empirical confirmation of suspicions (reference to Hanley and Sikk, 2016) that many parties labelled as populist because of their anti-establishment rhetoric are not necessarily very populist in other, fundamental ways.

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86 On this issue see: Kmeť (2018b), MEMO98 (2020, February 11). MONITORING TELEVÍZIÍ - PARLAMENTNÉ VOLBY 2020, <http://memo98.sk/article/monitoring-televizii-parlamentne-volby-2020>, SITA (2017, April 4). MAĎARIČ: Je zaujímavé, že RTVS je terčom zo strany *SNS* aj opozície, <https://www.noviny.sk/210722-madaric-je-zaujimave-ze-rtvs-je-tercom-zo-strany-sns-aj-opozicie>, TIS (2019, October 24). Po TASR pomáha Rezník Dankovi aj v RTVS, <https://transparency.sk/sk/po-tasr-pomaha-reznik-dankovi-aj-v-rtvrtvs> (2020, February 2). Vyhlásenie RTVS, <https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/clanky/216933/vyhlasenie-rtvs>, Kernová, M. (2020, January 30). V RTVS stopli pripravené reportáže o Dankovi a Zsuzsovej, dvaja redaktori dali výpoveď, <https://www.omeiach.com/blog/17070-v-rtvs-stopli-pripravene-reportaze-o-dankovi-a-zsuzsovej-dvaja-redaktori-dali-vypoved>, Kernová, M. (2020, February 24). Rezník vypomáha Dankovi do poslednej chvíle, pchá ho aj tam, kde už nepatrí, <https://www.omeiach.com/blog/17234-reznik-vypomaha-dankovi-do-poslednej-chvile-pcha-ho-aj-tam-kde-uz-nepatri>

Considering this context, and based on previous analysis, we can say that *SNS* presented a set of policy proposals of which many were of populist nature. These policies aimed at increasing income or benefits for almost anyone, and at the same time, as a result, decreasing state budget resources (or increasing state debt). There was apparently no long-term plan either about positive or negative impacts of these policy measures. There were in the end no radical and paradigmatic policy reforms suggested - that were actually very much needed. There were by and large no heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms. Perhaps one exception could be seen a special sector tax introduced on food retail chains. There was also presentation of some socially conservative policies in criminal justice field. All in all, our findings correlate with Norris (2020) who wrote that the *SNS* endorses leftwing economic policies but shows conservative social values.

Regarding circumventing established institutions and downplaying veto players, in some cases, the two political parties that formed the government (especially *SNS* but also *Smer-SD*), approached directly the Parliament (via their MPs), if their policy proposals did not pass in the Cabinet, or did not consider politically useful to discuss them first either in the Cabinet or in the Coalition Council. This way of making policy was typical for *SNS* especially in the last year of its participation in the government (when the coalitions' cohesion was easing).

It cannot be said that *SNS* deliberately limited participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors. Rather, *SNS* was active to present its ideas in public discourse, to show off. Yet, as a result, it is true that *SNS* presented many (not all!) policy initiatives that either were not consulted with coalition partners, or with other state bodies and stakeholders at large. Occasionally, some of these policies did not pass in the Parliament (such as e-vignettes abolishment, or a ban on Sunday shopping), or did not materialise for other reasons (e.g. costly idea to launch national air carrier, or a plan to establish a Ministry for Tourism Industry).

As a result, there was not much use of discursive governance, but rather populist discourse. *SNS* policy proposals were usually criticised by the opposition, mainstream media and many experts. However, there were some proposals supported by some stakeholders as well as by one of the two coalition partners, and even by part of the opposition.

As mentioned, an attempt by *SNS* chairman at discursive governance failed. Obviously, the election results and evaporating popularity of Andrej Danko also suggest that something went wrong here. It was not tabloid and highly emotional communication style, or even recurrent crisis framing that could be seen as producing by *SNS*. There were just occasional episodes of this type of communication, or occasional personal communication style of Danko himself. This way of communication was clearly adopted by *Smer-SD* and *SNS* in the economic and family policy only in the election campaign in autumn and winter of 2019/2020, too.

*SNS* in particular did not use Manichean discourse, but rather confusing, blurred discourse. It was a discourse – and related policies - that attempted to transform the party from a single-issue ownership party (“nationalism”) to a party similar to a moderate, conservative party through generous, almost socialist, economic and family as well as pro-business policies. However, this attempt that was by and large built on a single person, and many popular/populist policy measures, failed. Surprisingly, journalists' prognosis about future of rising populist star and old political party, were correct this time.

Sociological surveys suggest that *SNS* was able to keep mainly older voters and lost younger generation (Kern, 2019).<sup>87</sup> From the point of view of issue-ownership, *SNS* was challenged by more specialised or more issue-ownership authentic parties: for the business, there was *SaS*. For social welfare, and soft nationalism, there was *Smer-SD*. For spreading fear from migrants and LGBT or gender issues, there were *Kotlebovci-LSNS* and new party *Vlast' (Patria)*. For true Christians-Catholics, there was *Christian Democratic Movement*. For all issues combined, there was *We are a Family* (see, e.g. Šnidl, 2020b, d). Even the *OLaNO* movement, a catch-all anti-corruption “party”, the recent elections’ biggest winner, had adopted some portions of these agendas.

## **Policy Recommendations**

If the goal of this research endeavour was to compare only selected policy areas, then it is challenging to come to specific policy recommendations on particular populist policy making in government. Although there may be some common features of populist policies, these can be in individual country cases differently prioritised. Thus, potential recommendations would be rather aiming at research design rather than on policy process as such.

First, perhaps the selected indicators should be calibrated more precisely. For example, instead of “partly” or “fully” congruent measure or policy process or discourse, we could use four levels, for each populist level covering 25%. However, this would require to have a more precise calibration of input. This is in line with the idea of the four global income levels as suggested by Hans Rosling.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, maybe in the same way we should consider whether there is negative impact of an individual policy measure. Not everything that is labelled as populist by some stakeholders is populist or negatively seen by others. Furthermore, it is different if there is enacted a minor populist measure or if there is a major populist measure adopted. Thus, in addition to negativity of a particular measure/process/discourse, we could also assess its importance or “size” of content, or “intensity” in case of both policy process and discourse. Finally, we should include – as we have attempted here – also policy measures that were just considered, but finally not adopted. This is useful for more in-depth understanding of populist nature of a political party/movement in the government. Yet this is quite challenging task – as we have mentioned, *SNS* submitted or considered almost a 100 initiatives during its four year term in government. Nonetheless, we present here a possible draft of new analytical framework for assessing populist parties/movements in government.

### **Possible New Analytical Framework**

(draft)

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87 See also Veková štruktúra všetkých voličov (Age Structure of All Voters, <https://infogram.com/vekova-struktura-volicov-1h7j4djvlwz94nr>, Focus+Ako (2020), Prieskum volebných preferencií (Opinion Pol), <https://libinst.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/50dni-prieskum-26-2-2020.pdf>

88 See <https://www.gapminder.org/topics/four-income-levels/>

<b>Suggested Own Policy Measures</b>	Adopted Policy Proposal - With Minor Changes	Adopted Policy Proposal - With Major Changes	Abandoned Policy Proposal	Rejected/not Approved Policy Proposal	Just raised as an issue/briefly discussed
<b>Supported Others Policy Measures</b>	Adopted Policy Proposal - With Minor Changes	Adopted Policy Proposal - With Major Changes	Abandoned Policy Proposal	Rejected/not Approved Policy Proposal	Just raised as an issue/briefly discussed
<b>Magnitude of Policy Proposal</b> (impact on society/economy)	Minor/Medium/Major or 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%	Minor/Medium/Major or 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%	Minor/Medium/Major or 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%	Minor/Medium/Major or 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%	Minor/Medium/Major or 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%
<b>Level/ Intensity of Populism: Content</b> (each checked with three reliable sources)	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable
<b>Level/ Intensity of Populism: Process</b> (party negotiations or parliament) (each checked with three reliable sources)	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable



Level/ Intensity of Populism: <b>Rhetoric</b>  (each checked with three reliable sources)	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable	25%, 50%, 75%, 100%, not applicable
<b>Timeframe:</b>	The first year The second year The third year The fourth (or before general elections) year	The first year The second year The third year The fourth (or before general elections) year	The first year The second year The third year The fourth (or before general elections) year	The first year The second year The third year The fourth (or before general elections) year	The first year The second year The third year The fourth (or before general elections) year

Second, each populist party policies, processes and discourses reflect unique features of a country at a certain time period, and its political leaders. Thus, for example, the most serious and negative long-term populist policy measure, adopted also with support of SNS as a constitutional measure, was actually shortening and fixing pension age at 64 years. Moreover, SNS in particular suggested (and this has been approved) that there will be a minimum standard pension regardless of previous contribution to the pension system. In particular, technically, instead of relating minimal pension to a minimal amount for living, there is correlation with an average salary increase.<sup>89</sup> This particular latter measure suggested by SNS could be seen within overall pension reform as less significant.<sup>90</sup> It impacts about 200,000 pensioners who get an increase of their pensions in value of 55 EUR per month. There is a moral, rather than financial issue behind this proposal – it discourages to contribute to pension system in the long run (Mihál, 2019).

However, the experts argue that pension system reform, passed in 2019, shows more typical populist features and has more serious and long-term negative impact on public finances than regularly updated and adjusted family policies (Mihál, 2020, see also interview with Novysedlák, 2020). For example, Košta (2017) argued that the main demographic feature in Slovakia is population ageing. There will be more pensioners than working age population in 30 years from now. This demographic trend will have the serious consequences both for the

89 SITA/IFP (2019). Dlhodobá udržateľnosť dôchodkového systému je opäť ohrozená, upozorňuje Inštitút finančnej politiky, <https://glob.zoznam.sk/dlhodoba-udrzatelnost-dochodkoveho-systemu-je-opat-ohrozena-upozornuje-institut-financnej-politiky/>, SITA (2018, August 21). Dankova SNS chce minimálne dôchodky naviazať na priemernú mzdu, o podpore vyjednáva so Smerom, <https://www.webnoviny.sk/sns-chce-minimalne-dochodky-naviazat-na-priemernu-mzdu-o-podpore-novely-vyjednavaju-so-smerom/>

90 SITA (2019, August 3). Naviazanie minimálneho dôchodku na priemernú mzdu je kozmetické opatrenie, tvrdí analytik, <https://www.webnoviny.sk/naviazanie-minimalneho-dochodku-na-priemernu-mzdu-je-kozmeticke-opatrenie-tvrdi-analytik/>



financing of pension system and for the preservation of pension relations as the main resource of revenues of retired people at adequate levels.

However, if “the main objective of any pension scheme is to ensure a decent standard of living for the elderly” (Coimbra, 2018, p.61), then *SNS*’s minor change in the overall pension reform can be seen as relatively less important, and, in fact, positively. However, *SNS* general support for pension reform can be seen as clearly populist or impractical, at best, in the long run. This assessment may be influenced by ideologies, too. From a left-wing perspective (social-democratic, ex.), it’s positive measure. From a fiscally conservative perspective, typical of center-right parties, it’s negative. *SNS*, as mentioned, was left economically, and right in social values.

Yet this, by and large, salient issue, that is related to the long-term social or welfare policy, was not selected for discussion among selected policy areas – unless we understand economic policy very broadly. Moreover, this issue nicely illustrates how value-based and specific can be assessing specific policies.

Third, the results (and their interpretation) are different if a populist party is a minor member in a coalition government or whether it is in a single-party government. The position in coalition government, and, moreover, being a minor member of coalition government, significantly impacts available policy options.

Finally, we have witnessed here actually an unsuccessful attempt at transformation of formerly nationalist party into a moderate conservative party with left-welfare policies. This attempt has been accompanied with many populist policy initiatives and a specific, not typically or uniquely populist discourse, but ultimately failed. Thus, recommendations could be perhaps related and relevant for other nationalist and, possibly, populist parties that may wish to undergo such transformation in the future. In other words, if we want to have successful transition of populist or nationalist parties, we have to learn from mistakes made here. It is certainly noteworthy to mention that this transformation was so closely related to certain aspects of populism, but not to other aspects of populism.

It appears that the transformative leader must be highly talented and skilled in communication with the media (and, increasingly, on social media), as well as himself/herself ethically based on solid grounds. Moreover, the party should be internally open to fully (not formal) democratic decision-making. The party should be also represented by a team, rather than by its leader and some ministries (that are themselves not members of the party). Overall, communication must be value-based and internally consistent. All in all, these are probably necessary but not sufficient conditions for intended transformation. For example, transformation of *SNS* was seriously hampered by presence of many alternative, and even more radical and populist parties/movements, as well as by a general feeling of captured state.

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Select E-mail communication:

RE: Hodnotenie regionálneho rozvoja pre EK, 2020-04-23 18:22

Od: Attila Tóth <[attila.toth@vicepremier.gov.sk](mailto:attila.toth@vicepremier.gov.sk)><[maria.zapletalova@vicepremier.gov.sk](mailto:maria.zapletalova@vicepremier.gov.sk)>

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