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HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

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FOREWORD

The rise of populism in Central Europe since accession to the European Union is one of the most frequently discussed social phenomena in that region. Today, the activities of populist actors challenge established liberal-democratic regimes. Rising populism creates new and deepens existing social problems. In some post-communist countries, populist political forces are now part of the party system's mainstream. In Slovakia, for example, populists enjoy a dominant position in recent national politics.

For quite some time now, Slovak populist parties have effectively appealed to a substantial segment of the population. Electoral success has provided the means for populist parties to pursue their own program and political goals in most areas of public life. One of the principal tools used by Slovak populist politicians is exploiting issues of ethno-national character such as ethnic identity, language, or the relations between members of various ethnic communities.

The analysis of national populism concentrates on the form of populism that uses nationalism as one of its vehicles to mass appeal. The analysis examines the activities of political actors, their political argumentation, and the strategies they employ to mobilize the public. Further analysis identifies the issues used to appeal to voters and seeks to understand the socio-cultural background of populist politics, including people's views regarding Slovak society's development with issues such as the status of ethnic minorities, minority policy, interethnic relations, issues related to cultural, ethnic and language identity, etc.

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The project is a part of IVO research activities aimed at analyzing factors determining the success of populist forces in Slovakia and other Central and Eastern European countries. The publication *National Populism in Slovakia* represents continuation of two IVO publications published in recent years, specifically *Democracy and Populism in Central Europe: The Visegrad Elections and Their Aftermath* (edited by Martin Bútora, Oľga Gyárfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov and Thomas W. Skladony, 2007) and *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (edited by Grigorij Mesežnikov, Oľga Gyárfášová and Daniel Smilov, 2008).

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Grigorij Mesežnikov

NATIONAL POPULISM IN SLOVAKIA: ACTORS, ISSUES, STRATEGIES

1. SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In recent years, political actors in Slovakia began to appeal to voters in ways that are based on applying populist strategies with strong ethnic and even nationalist leanings. These strategies of appealing to voters have been characteristic of Slovakia's political scene for quite some time. Ever since the fall of the communist regime in 1989 and the establishment of pluralistic democracy, these appeals have proven to be sufficiently effective and in certain periods have produced ample power and political profit to its espousers. The recent revival of national populism deserves special attention especially because it takes place in different conditions – at least compared to the 1990s – established after a generally successful social transformation that led to developing the foundations of a liberal-democratic regime and fulfilling the country's integration ambitions, i.e. obtaining full-fledged membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The present study will use the term of "national populism" to refer to political activities (in multitude displays) oriented toward appealing to voters through traditional populist methods that strongly emphasize ethnic and nationalist elements. This term includes a broader spectrum of political actors, not merely believers of extremist or radical nationalistic concepts; we are aware that some political science literature uses a narrower understanding of "national populism" to refer particularly to populist radical right-wing parties around Europe, for instance Le Front National in France, Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs or Bündnis Zukunft Österreich in Austria, Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang and Le Front National in Belgium, etc. Of course, ethnic and nationalist elements in politics may take on more universal forms as they are also used by non-populist political forces; however, the issue of non-populist nationalism shall not form the focus of this study. The main subject of the present analysis is political activities that combine populist appeal with ethnic nationalism.

It is plain to see that the most important factor catalyzing the recent revival of national populism in Slovakia was the shift in power brought by the 2006 parliamentary elections after which a new government was formed by three political parties that demonstrate elements of national populism as inseparable constituents of their ideological and political identity, namely Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD, hereafter Smer), the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS, hereafter HZDS). These parties' combined election results in 2006 and their leaders' decision to form a new ruling coalition cannot be perceived and interpreted outside the context of national populism as the main tool of voter mobilization and a cultural-political binding agent of a certain part of Slovakia's party elite. In the last two years, the national-populist appeal has influenced the overall atmosphere within society and significantly affected the environment for a dialogue between different groups of citizens, particularly those whose identity is based on ethnic, language or other such foundations.

When examining activities of political actors who are considered the chief protagonists of national populism as well as their impact on the intercultural dialogue in Slovakia, it is important to bear in mind more general socio-political and historic factors. It was the long-term effect of these factors that formed the socio-cultural environment in which national populists spread and capitalized on their tidings. They may be summed up as follows:

1. Slovakia is a country with a dominant titular ethnic entity (i.e. Slovak nation) and a dominant confession (i.e. Catholicism) but simultaneously with a relatively high degree of ethnic and denominational diversity that is represented by numerous ethnic minorities and groups as well as religious communities.

2. Over the past century, the Slovaks formed part of five constitutional entities (i.e. Austro-Hungarian Empire, the first Czechoslovak Republic, wartime Slovak State, renewed Czechoslovak Republic and independent Slovak Republic).

3. In the course of the 20th century, the Slovak ethnic entity gradually went through various stages of its national development that was affected by mutual interactions with other ethnic groups. When part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly in the final period of its existence, it was subjected to assimilation pressure from the dominant Hungarian nation. Upon emergence of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, it became the object of practical enforcement of political and ideological construct of the single Czechoslovak nation that on the one hand granted it the status of part of statehood nation but on the other hand neglected or directly questioned its ethnic and linguistic independence. For several years during World War II, it existed as a semi-sovereign, ethnically defined national state that came to be known as the wartime Slovak State. After World War II, it was part of a two-nation partnership that recognized its ethnic and linguistic independence (post-war Czechoslovakia). Since the emergence of the Slovak Republic in 1993, it has existed as a fully sovereign, independent and prevailingly civic national state.

4. In the course of the 20th century, Slovakia was ruled by a great variety of political regimes, ranging from monarchist semi-authoritarianism to pluralistic democracy, fascist totalitarianism, limited "national" democracy, communist totalitarianism and a rotation of liberal and non-liberal democracy regimes between 1990 and 2006.

5. Frequent rotation of social orders and political regimes over a relatively short historical period led to various degree of particular population groups' self-identification with existing or obsolete society or government systems. Consequently, these groups demonstrated their loyalty to different types of political culture (e.g. democratic or authoritarian), which immediately affected their political behavior as well as political actors' strategies of appealing to them. All this took place against the backdrop of ongoing development of the population's ethnic self-identification. This development was accompanied by increasing national self-awareness of the Slovaks as well as equally strong ethnic self-identification of members of principal ethnic minorities, particularly ethnic Hungarians.

6. The changes in the country's socio-political situation carried out by the domestic political elite (often instigated or directly managed from the outside) were often accompanied by direct involvement of large population groups in implementing or resisting them, which at later stages affected the status of entire social and ethnic groups.

In Slovakia, the tradition of populist appeals to voters was sufficiently deeply rooted even before the war, when appealing to one's ethnic origins was prevalent. While most leading Slovak politicians of the 20th century interpreted the so-called 'Slovak issue' as a combination of historic, constitutional, social and cultural issues, they also emphasized ethnic and nationalist elements and self-identification based on ethnic origin and affiliation to ethnically defined community, i.e. nation and its language. This tradition has had its adherents after 1989 as well.

2. ACTORS

Following the 1989 collapse of the communist regime and subsequent restoration of a democratic system of government with all its procedural attributes including electoral competition, political forces that were considered populist because of their internal character, their program, professed values, ideological background and preferred ways of appealing to voters have become an important part of the country's system of political parties. Since 1992, these forces regularly obtained a high share of the popular vote in parliamentary elections and in the case of favorable post-election configuration they formed coalition governments that could rely on a majority in parliament. This was the case in 1992 when the HZDS formed a majority crypto-coalition (and subsequently regular coalition) government with the SNS, in 1994 when election results paved the way to forming the ruling coalition of HZDS – SNS – ZRS and in 2006 when the incumbent administration of Smer – SNS – HZDS was formed.

As far as a typology of populist forces in Slovakia is concerned, the basic differentiation criterion is their attitude toward execution of power, which allows us to distinguish between 'hard' (i.e. authoritarian) and 'soft' (i.e. prevailingly non-authoritarian) populists. During the early transformation period before the EU accession process was launched, Slovakia was ruled by the first generation of populism politicians, so-called 'hardcore' populists who were associated in the HZDS and the SNS; the second generation was formed during the period of reviving the country's integration ambitions (i.e. between 1998 and 2002) and began to flourish shortly before and immediately after Slovakia's accession to the EU when 'soft' populists (e.g. Smer) became a dominant political force.[1]

In recent years, both generations of populist actors began to cooperate; in 2006, they raised their cooperation to the government level. Previously, conditionality of the EU accession process limited and even directly prevented participation of authoritarian populists in power by discouraging other political forces from forming alliances with them. The situation changed in 2004 when Central and Eastern European countries including Slovakia became full-fledged EU members and coalition and power strategies of local political leaders became less dependent on views of EU leaders. As a direct result of this change, Slovak populists (both 'soft' and 'hard') gained a dominant position within the country's party system, formed an alliance and thus acquired the leverage to form and determine public policies in all socially relevant sectors and, consequently, steer the country's development.

A typical national-populist subject in Slovakia is the SNS. Established in 1990, the party declared adherence to the legacy of the historic SNS that existed until 1938. In the first free parliamentary elections in Slovakia's modern history, the party garnered enough to seats to serve on the Slovak National Council. In subsequent years, it became a relevant political force that was represented in parliament between 1990 and 2008, with a sole exception of the period of 2002–2006, when it dwelled outside parliament after a defeat in the 2002 elections that came about primarily as the result of internal rift within the party.

The SNS was the most vocal political force behind the Slovak separatist movement between 1990 and 1992. Relatively quickly after its emergence and entry to parliament, it began to further the concept of Slovakia's state independence. In periods of 1993–1994, 1994–1998 and 2006–2008 it formed part of the ruling coalition, which allowed it to influence public policies in all important areas. It is a force of radical nationalism that uses right-wing and anti-communist rhetoric. It is a sworn opponent of the civil concept of political nation as it advocates the concept of ethnically-defined nation.

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[1] For further details see Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Bútora, Martin – Kollár, Miroslav: "Slovakia" in Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Smilov, Daniel (eds.): *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2008).

The SNS perceives the Slovak Republic as a national state of ethnic Slovaks and furthers the concept of assimilation with respect to ethnic minorities that is based, among other principles, on *a priori* questioning ethnic Hungarians' loyalty to the Slovak Republic. On the 'theoretical' level, it shows in constant questioning of the fact that Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians are truly of Hungarian origin; on the practical level, it leads to submitting proposals that complicate implementation of ethnic Hungarians' minority rights in the field of political representation, use of language, education, culture, regional development and maintaining ties with Hungary, which ethnic Hungarians consider their fatherland in terms of culture and language. In the mid-1990s, the SNS unsuccessfully attempted to introduce the system of so-called alternative education for minority children. Its practical implementation would amount to an irreparable decline in the standard of minority rights with major political implications.

Throughout its modern existence, activities of the SNS have contributed to the systematic undermining of civil dialogue, particularly in terms of interactions between the majority population and minority communities. SNS leaders have become notorious for their incessantly confrontational rhetoric, aggressive tone and offensive statements aimed against political representatives and members of ethnic minorities. The party appeals primarily to voters with nationalist views and authoritarian concepts of society's political organization.

Another mainstay of national-populist politics in Slovakia is Smer, which proclaims itself a social-democratic party. It was founded in 1999 by Robert Fico, former vice-chairman of the Party of Democratic Left who deserted the party, because he disagreed with its political line and did not see the prospects of fulfilling his own political ambitions in it.

Since its emergence, Smer has gone through remarkable development as it evolved from a "non-ideological party of pragmatic solutions" to a third-way party that according to Smer leaders amalgamated values of conservatism, social democracy and liberalism (even later those of "leftists, social democrats and national liberals") to a party that openly declared social-democratic orientation. From the very outset, the nationalist element has been popular among Smer leaders, which is evident by their adoption of "pro-Slovak" (i.e. pro-national) positions on issues concerning interethnic and international relations, interpretation of various historic events and figures, general perception of society's development following the fall of communism and coalition strategies. When seeking a viable ideological anchor, party leaders did not hesitate to use nationalist arguments. For instance Boris Zala, former party vice-chairman and one of its principal ideologists wrote in 2002 that the third way concept (i.e. the party's new ideology) of Smer was, among other things, a "renewed search for national meaning and historical anchoring of Slovakness".[2]

In the 2002 parliamentary elections, Smer earned parliamentary representation. Between 2002 and 2006, it behaved as an implacable opposition force that criticized all relevant reform measures adopted by the centre-right administration in socio-economic area. It promised fundamental changes should it come to power. Its communication with voters, sweeping criticism of government's performance and proposed measures to tackle existing problems all showed clear traces of populism. Messages of nationalist nature formed an integral part of the party's mobilization strategies. The party confirmed its 'pro-national' orientation by cooperating with nationalistically-oriented political formations before presidential and regional elections in 2004.

After the 2006 parliamentary elections, Smer formed a ruling coalition with the SNS and the HZDS. The decision to establish government cooperation with the SNS in particular provoked negative reactions on the part of the Party of European Socialists (PES), which granted Smer a candidate's status (*de facto* associated membership) in 2005. In October 2006, the PES suspended the party's status, citing government cooperation with the SNS; in February

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[2] Zala, Boris: "Kam smeruje cesta Smeru" ['Where Smer's Path Leads'], *Sme* daily, September 26, 2002.

2008, it restored the status but refused to make a definitive decision on full-fledged membership.

The decision of Smer to form the new administration with the SNS and the HZDS was catalyzed primarily by power ambitions. Leaders of Smer tried to justify the decision by the motivation to create favorable conditions for the implementation of socio-economic policies based on social-democratic values (e.g. developing the welfare state).

According to interpretation by Smer leaders, Robert Fico's administration pursues social-democratic policies while its coalition partners endorse these policies and even adapt to them their own priorities. In fact, two minor ruling parties actively pursue their own concepts in several areas, which in the case of radical-nationalist SNS leads to direct attempts to intervene with the established system of minority rights' implementation, for instance in the field of education and use of native languages.

The presence of the SNS in government allows its leaders as well as liked-minded representatives to take an active part in the public discourse and sway it toward strengthening ethnic nationalism. This leads to a general change in overall social atmosphere, including the area of interethnic relations. SNS leaders repeatedly present aggressive and offensive statements aimed against elected representatives of ethnic Hungarians, forcing Smer to take a stance. Leaders of Smer usually adopt a benevolent stance to excesses by SNS officials and do not take initiative in criticizing them unless forced to do so by the media; even then, they tend to belittle them and "outweigh" their forced disassociation by pointing out that these excesses were provoked by political representatives of ethnic Hungarians (i.e. Party of Hungarian Coalition – SMK) or Hungarian government officials.

This approach of Smer has two plausible explanations. First, the main priority of Smer as a dominant ruling party is preserving its strong power position, which under present circumstances would be impossible without close cooperation with the SNS. Second, Smer leaders' views on issues that most frequently become the focus of SNS leaders' attention (i.e. minority issues in all possible contexts) are influenced by the party's overall 'pro-national' orientation. Although Smer and SNS representatives use somewhat different rhetoric when it comes to minority issues, both parties' overall perception of their actual content is often identical.

Another political subject that may be considered an adherent of national populism is the HZDS. The party was founded in 1991 as a product of division processes within the revolutionary and reformist VPN (Public against Violence) movement that led the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia in 1989 and triumphed in the first free democratic parliamentary elections in June 1990. Initiators of the split within the VPN and founders of the HZDS led by then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar advocated a transformation model that differed from the 'federal' model implemented in Slovakia by the VPN and its coalition partners between 1990 and 1992. The HZDS sought voter support especially among those citizens who opposed the course of the transformation process.

A strong pillar of the party's political agenda and an important factor of its voter support has been the issue of dividing the Czechoslovak Federation. Before the split, the HZDS portrayed itself as an advocate of 'national ambitions' of the Slovaks and proposed constitutional solutions that went beyond the framework of the existing federal model. Following its victory in the 1992 elections, the HZDS became the principal political actor of the division process in Slovakia; ever since 1993, it has presented itself as the "architect of Slovakia's independent statehood".

Since its emergence, the HZDS portrayed itself as a "nationally oriented" and "pro-Slovak" political force. In early stages of the party's existence, i.e. between 1992 and 1998, its nationalist wing was represented most vocally by a group of politicians whose views on in-

terethnic relations, Slovakia's historic legacy, the character of the state and other issues were not fundamentally different from those of SNS leaders. During this period, this group of party leaders enjoyed the greatest popularity and had the greatest impact on the party's performance, program and ideological profile.

The internal position of the nationalist wing weakened hand in hand with gradual electoral and overall political debilitation of the HZDS. The party's long-term isolation in the opposition between 1998 and 2006 was accompanied by a dramatic decline in voter support and intense internal regrouping that eventually led to edging the 'nationally-oriented' wing out of the HZDS.

But the departure of nationalist-oriented leaders and authentic upholders of the 'national' agenda does not mean that the HZDS ceased to be a national-populist formation. The party regularly conveys messages that fit the description of national populism, although their frequency and intensity is lower compared to the SNS or Smer. Unlike its coalition allies, the HZDS does not act as initiator or a pivotal actor of conflict situations concerning interethnic relations. Rather it reacts to such situations; however, most of these reactions are essentially identical to those presented by the SNS and Smer.

The analysis of early developments following the 2006 parliamentary elections justifies a conclusion that political parties forming the incumbent administration were somewhat held back and managed to tame displays of national radicalism and related verbal aggressiveness. Government responsibility and especially fears of negative international reactions to possible conflicts with ethnic and nationalist background have inspired cautiousness and even vigilance on the part of ruling parties' leaders.

Two years after the 2006 elections, though, an interesting phenomenon may be observed: compared to the SNS, Smer began to show a more perceptible inclination toward presenting nationalist positions on matters related to interethnic relations, implementation of minority rights and interpretation of national history. With a certain degree of simplification, one might even say that while the SNS has still not 'matched' the radicalism of its positions on these matters it became notorious for in the past, Smer in 2008 matched and in some respects even eclipsed the radicalism of its positions presented in the period of 2000–2006, when it was an opposition party.

3. ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE NATIONAL-POPULIST APPEAL

The true stance of all political actors, including national populists, on various types of mutual interactions (i.e. dialogue or conflict) between particular population groups in Slovakia is manifested through their positions on the following categories of issues that are particularly relevant to the *status quo* and prospects of the intercultural dialogue:[3]

- Understanding the fabric of society, defining the character of the system of government, choosing the concept of nation, the dichotomy of 'ethnic' vs. 'civil', and general harmony between the political credo and liberal-democratic values;

- Interpretation of national history, perception of particular historical periods, events and personalities;

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[3] The presented order does not reflect potential effectiveness of particular categories of issues used by national-populist parties when addressing and mobilizing voters. The hierarchy of issues used by national populists according to their mobilization effects would require a separate research and analysis.

- Relation to ethnic minorities, perception of minority rights' implementation in the areas of native language, culture and education, relation to political representation of the largest Slovakia's ethnic minority (i.e. ethnic Hungarians), and perception of the issue of Slovak-Hungarian historic reconciliation;

- Relation to Hungary, which ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia view as their fatherland in terms of culture and language.

3.1. Character of the state

If we are to define national populists' preference of government and political regime, we must realize that all three parties of the incumbent ruling coalition may be described as etatist parties, although etatism in their activities shows to a different degree and is differently accentuated.

Smer openly subscribes to etatism as the foundation of its political profile and advocates government's strong role in a number of areas; etatist paternalism of Smer was fully exposed in a symptomatic statement by its chairman Robert Fico who at the beginning of 2008 said that government should be "the father of all citizens", just like the church is the "mother for believers".[4] The SNS considers an independent Slovak state to be the greatest social value and embodiment of long-term emancipation ambitions of the Slovak nation. The HZDS also emphasizes the importance of independent Slovak statehood; furthermore, it claims a special credit for direct participation in the process of establishing it in 1993.

All ruling parties' positions on the character of the state are affected by ethnic and nationalist approach (i.e. obvious preference of the national principle over the civic one), historic mythologizing, appropriation syndrome and negligence of issues related to the type of the regime, quality of democracy, liberal-democratic foundation of Slovakia's constitutional system and importance of abiding by the principles of constitutional liberalism. Some measures the SNS proposed to ensure proper performance of government's functions directly contradicted basic principles of liberal democracy, for instance repeated proposals to pass a repressive bill on the protection of the republic or to outlaw the party that politically represents the country's ethnic Hungarians.

Ever since the 2006 parliamentary elections, two ruling parties (Smer and SNS) symbolically strive to strengthen the national (or ethnic) element of the Slovak statehood. They do so under the pretext of inevitability to promote patriotism, Slovak identity, national solidarity, etc.

Already the prime minister, Robert Fico declared in July 2007 that "the Slovaks lack a national outburst" and that schools neglect a patriotic element in education. According to him, Slovakia is being engulfed by "the cancer of indifference, which is only one step away from national unconsciousness".[5] A display of such indifference was the inadequate attention most Slovak media paid to the "patriotic celebration" of the Day of St. Constantine and Method. At the end of 2007, Fico announced that government and all ruling parties would in the coming year focus on awakening people's national consciousness, encouraging their respect for state symbols and deepening general public's patriotism and awareness of Slovak history and his-

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[4] Uličianska, Zuzana: "Fico: Cirkev matkou, štát otcom" ['Fico: Mother Church, Father State'], *Sme* daily, January 25, 2008.

[5] "Sviatok: Fico na Devíne vyzýval na výchovu k vlastenectvu" ['Holiday: Fico in Devín Called on Education to Patriotism'], *SITA* news agency, July 5, 2007.

torical figures. "[People's] relation to the country is unsatisfactory," Fico said. "Patriotism does not reach the quality one would expect in a developed country in the heart of Europe."[6]

According to Smer and the SNS, encouraging the Slovaks' patriotism should take place as the process of distinguishing themselves from Hungarians (this aspect is emphasized by the SNS) as well as from non-nationally (i.e. civically) oriented and cosmopolitan members of the majority population with a lukewarm attitude to patriotism (this aspect has recently become a favorite issue of Smer). This philosophy may be illustrated by Fico's statement from July 2008 in which he emphasized the need to strengthen togetherness ("solidarity") of the Slovaks that must be built as a "sturdy barrier against activities of the peculiar sort of adventurers who undermine Slovakia's spiritual integrity".[7] In 2007, Fico publicly complained that Slovak media have become a shelter for "spiritual homeless [and] media kibitzers who are unable to identify with their homeland's fate or find their state identity".[8] Dividing the Slovaks into true, nationally-oriented citizens and those who inadequately identify themselves with independent Slovakia is typical of all parties of the incumbent administration.

In Fico's interpretation, loyalty to national values is an irreplaceable factor in determining a country's survival in the modern world. "The only chance to survive in this complicated and unjust environment with dignity and sovereignty is to stick to Slovak national and state interests and pull together, whether we are on the right, on the left or in the middle," Fico declared. "I hereby call on [embracing] such togetherness."[9] Fico continued that it was "our duty [to build] Slovak pride" and encouraged the Slovaks to draw inspiration from "the Russians whose pride was restored by President Putin". To a follow-up question reminding him that Russia suffers from a democratic deficit, Fico responded by saying that he did not understand what national pride had to do with democracy.[10] This formulation indicates that in the process of building the state, the Smer leader views national (or ethnic) element to be much more important than the quality (or democratic substance) of the regime.

For the SNS, the use of 'patriotic' motives forms an integral part of its confrontational desire to distinguish the Slovaks, particularly from the Hungarians. This may be illustrated by the ongoing process of installing typical Slovak crosses around Slovakia, including localities inhabited by mixed Slovak-Hungarian population. According to party leaders, the goal of the entire campaign is to show "the whole world that the Slovak nation is autochthonous on this territory, so that it is clear to everybody where Slovakia is and who is at home here."[11]

The element of confrontation is obvious in party leaders' references to the Constantine-Methodist tradition as the foundation of the Slovaks' statehood and identity. The SNS emphasizes the Slovaks' exclusive 'patent' to this tradition and juxtaposes it to other cultural traditions, including those that provide the foundation to integration groupings Slovakia is part of. According to SNS leaders, "the Constantine-Methodist tradition is the oldest and the most solid part of the Slovaks' identity. The Slovaks are ahead of other nations because the Constantine-Methodist legacy amalgamated eastern and western values of European thinking in

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[6] "Fico: Kritizuje Slovákov, že nie sú dosť vlasteneckí, chce to zmeniť" ['Fico: Criticizes the Slovaks for Lack of Patriotism, Aims to Change It'], *SITA* news agency, December 18, 2007.

[7] "Politici vyzývali na vlastenectvo" ['Politicians Appealed on Patriotism'], *Sme* daily, July 7, 2008.

[8] "Fico: V médiách sú duchovní bezdomovci" ['Fico: Media Home to Spiritual Homeless'], www.sme.sk, August 29, 2007.

[9] "Fico na oslavách znovu vyzval k zjednoteniu spoločnosti" ['Fico at Celebration Again Called for Society's Unity'], *ČTK* news agency, August 29, 2008.

[10] "Fico sa pýtal, kto tu žil" ['Fico Asked Who Lived Here'], *Sme* daily, April 22, 2008.

[11] Jesenský, Mxxx: "Slota chce dvojkríže na juhu Slovenska" ['Slota Wants to Double-Cross Southern Slovakia'], *Sme* daily, January 9, 2008.

them. The existence of the Slovak Republic shows that the Constantine-Methodist tradition is stronger than Hungarian chauvinism, Prague Czechoslovakism or communist dictatorship."[12]

The SNS is the most active of all Slovak parties in fuelling the sense of danger to Slovak statehood and proposing measures designed to defend it whose repressive content contradicts basic principles of liberal democracy. One of its favorite legislative measures is the so-called bill on the protection of the republic. The SNS submits some form of the bill at every opportune moment, citing the need to neutralize consequences of Hungarian politicians' activities in Slovakia; the last time the SNS proposed such a bill was in 2008.

3.2. Interpretation of national history

In their interpretation of national history, national populists tend to mythologize and ethnicize, present the titular nation as older than it is, place its ethno-genesis as far back in history as possible, show a clear inclination to positive evaluation of authoritarian historic figures and a tendency to favorable evaluation of historic periods in which the nation was ruled by authoritarian regimes. National populists reproach critics of the mythologizing approach, including representatives of established academic circles, for insufficient national orientation and attempt to question their professional credibility. Premier Fico described his administration's attitude to the issue of Slovakia's history as cultivating "sound historicism as part of government policy" with respect to those who underrate the "national" element in history. "Unfortunately, we live in a reality where so-called spin doctors consider everything Slovak good enough to disparage it," he said.[13]

In 2008, the Smer chairman attempted to introduce the term of "old Slovaks" to the public and professional historical discourse. According to him, "old Slovaks" led by king Svätopluk ruled over the Great Moravian Empire when "other states had nothing – maybe some animals wandering around but certainly no state entities".[14] Many academic historians view the theory of "old Slovaks" who inhabited the Great Moravian Empire as a mythological construct that does not correspond to findings of historic science.

Fico openly demonstrated his inclination to mythologizing Slovakia's history early in 2008 when he defended the historical figure of highwayman Juraj Jánošík and called him the first socialist: "I want to ask the media not to belittle Slovak legends," said Fico. "It's been enough. We have [two options]: either respect the Jánošík tradition or replace the nation […]. Anti-Slovakism still dwells as a hidden bacillus in some Slovak historians. That is why these spiritually homeless people object to a free discussion on new terminology that speaks of old Slovaks or king Svätopluk."[15] According to Fico, "the media launched an inquisitive witch-hunt against everything Slovak […]. Only spiritually homeless or nationally ignorant may deprive the nation of the legend about Jánošík who struggled against social oppression."[16]

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[12] "SNS: Cyrilo-metodská tradícia si zaslúži väčšiu úctu" ['SNS: Constantine-Methodist Tradition Deserves Greater Respect'], *SITA* news agency, July 5, 2003.

[13] "Fico: Premiér zapálil v Bánove vatru zvrchovanosti" ['Fico: Premier Lit Sovereignty Torch in Bánov'], *SITA* news agency, July 18, 2008.

[14] Kern, Miroslav: "Vláda a premiér menia dejiny" ['Cabinet and Premier Alter History'], *Sme* daily, January 3, 2008.

[15] Vražda, Daniel: "Fico oslavoval Jánošíka ako Colotka" ['Fico Celebrated Jánošík Like Colotka'], *Sme* daily, January 26, 2008.

[16] "Fico: Legendu o Jánošíkovi môžu národu vziať len duchovní bezdomovci" ['Fico: Only Spiritually Homeless May Deprive Nation of Jánošík Legend'], *SITA* news agency, January 25, 2008.

National populists' inclination to positive perception of "nationally-oriented" historical figures with an authoritarian profile may be illustrated by efforts to pass a special law on the merits of Andrej Hlinka, a Catholic priest and one of political leaders of the Slovak nation in the first half of the 20th century. The SNS proposed to introduce the term of "father of the nation" to refer to Hlinka. One of the most active protagonists of the idea to pass a special law on Hlinka was Smer Vice-Chairman and Culture Minister Marek Maďarič who declared that Hlinka's "personality is unambiguous" and "his merits are extraordinary". The positive evaluation of Hlinka was to be imposed in an authoritative fashion that, if enforced in practice, could even restrict freedom of scientific research and public discussion. Maďarič called voices arguing that Hlinka's historical profile deserves detailed discussion "perfidious", arguing that "Hlinka's personality deserves mostly respect". [17] In line with this attitude, the SNS directly proposed to enact punishment for "defamation of Hlinka's name". The HZDS also supported 'enacting' Hlinka's merits; according to Vladimír Mečiar, his party identified with the SNS position rather than that of the opposition KDH that submitted a more moderate bill on Hlinka.

A special place among historic events whose interpretation is particularly important in terms of impact on Slovakia's socio-political development is the emergence and existence of the wartime Slovak state. The official state doctrine of the Slovak Republic is based on the anti-fascist tradition embodied by the Slovak National Uprising of 1944. Therefore, the modern Slovak Republic is considered a successor to the Czechoslovak Federation and neither legal nor political successor to the wartime Slovak state proclaimed in March 1939; however, a revisionist perception of the period of 1939–1945 has become part of the country's public and political discourse regarding the issue of national history since 1989. An integral part of this perception is the thesis that the wartime state (also called "the first Slovak Republic") was *de facto* a predecessor of the modern Slovak Republic, efforts to separate the totalitarian regime established by the pro-fascist HSĽS from the state itself, portray life in Slovakia during this period in a more positive light, disparage the regime's repressive, undemocratic and racist character, shift responsibility for perpetrated war crimes, including deportations of Jews, from domestic actors onto their external partners (i.e. Nazi Germany) and emphasize the positive role of its president Jozef Tiso.

The said inclination to a favorable perception of the wartime Slovak state causes (direct or indirect) confrontations with certain opinion or identity groups, including people with anti-fascist and liberal-democratic views, supporters of the common Czechoslovak state, the Jews, the Roma, the Czechs, non-Catholics, etc. Since 1989, principal upholders of revisionist ideas regarding the period of 1939–1945 have been nationalistically-oriented cultural associations and individuals (including some historians), Matica slovenská, a significant part of Catholic Church leaders; on the level of the country's party system, it has been primarily the SNS.

The SNS began to advertise its positive views on Slovak statehood from World War II immediately after its founding in 1990 and furthered them every time it was part of government (i.e. in 1993–1994, 1994–1998 and 2006–2008). In March 1998, it issued a declaration in which it honored founding of the Slovak state in March 1939 as the beginning of the first sovereign statehood of the modern Slovak nation. According to the SNS, March 14, 1939, "clearly showed the Christian values to which the Slovak nation must be anchored".[18]

In 2000, SNS Chairman Ján Slota defended a decision by the Žilina municipal council to unveil a plaque commemorating Jozef Tiso, President of the wartime state, alleging that other countries also honored their fascist leaders: "In Hungary's capital [they have a statue of] Horthy, who was a big time fascist, on a big horse," said Slota. "All around Italy, you see count-

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[17] Maďarič, Marek: "Ad Lex Hlinka", *Sme* daily, September 7, 2007.

[18] "SNS o slovenskom štáte" ['SNS on Slovak State'], *Sme* daily, March 16, 1998.

less busts of fascist Mussolini, in Germany and Austria you see loads of various plaques celebrating or commemorating Hitler."[19]

Two years later, Slota demanded that "all circumstances and true information on the execution of Tiso be made available to the Slovak public". He declared that if political meddling with the trial and abuse of justice is established, Tiso should be rehabilitated. Slota called conviction and execution of Tiso a "vendetta" and a "murder commissioned by the Czechs and communists".[20]

SNS leaders' positive views of the "first Slovak statehood" were automatically reflected in their negative perception of the Slovak National Uprising (SNP). In 2002, Slota declared that the SNP laid foundation of communist totality and the country's Soviet satellization. He claimed that the SNP "which was abused for 40 years to promote red totality … has lost its moral credit".[21]

In recent years, SNS leaders manifested a slight shift in their interpretation of the SNP. In 2004, SNS Vice-Chairwoman Anna Malíková-Belousovová called the SNP an act of "the Slovaks' opposition to fascism", but simultaneously refused the concept that the move was aimed against their own state. In August 2006, Belousovová declared that the SNS took its hat off to hundreds and thousands of victims claimed by the struggle against "perverted fascist ideology and its upholders".[22] These statements illustrate party leaders' overall perception of Slovakia's history during World War II, which is full of confusing and ambiguous interpretations. While SNS leaders' statements cannot be qualified as intentional nourishing of pro-fascist sentiments, they were undoubtedly inspired by efforts to appeal to those nationalist-oriented voters who view positive perception of 'the first Slovak statehood' as a display of true 'patriotism'.

On a declaratory level, Smer fully subscribes to the ideological legacy of the anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising. Its chairman Robert Fico repeatedly presented public statements in which he unambiguously condemned "the fascist regime" of the wartime Slovak state led by Tiso as well as war crimes perpetrated during that period. In order to strengthen his party's image of a principled anti-fascist force, Fico in 2007 declared he would oppose any attempts to revise importance of the SNP, claiming that "the cabinet will clamp down on [anybody] questioning the Slovak National Uprising".[23]

However, several serious cracks recently appeared in this seemingly integral attitude of Smer. It was not only its government cooperation with the SNS whose leaders harbor ambiguous views of the wartime Slovak state. Far more importantly, it was party leaders' tolerance of the fact that one Smer MP co-authored an anthology of odes to Jozef Tiso and their repeated defense of professional credit of historians who openly supported Fico's views on particular issues of the Slovaks' ancient history (concept of the "old Slovaks"); some of them were revisionist historians who openly advertise their sympathies to the wartime state and its President Jozef Tiso.

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[19] "Slota: Aj v Nemecku sú tabule na oslavu Hitlera" ['Slota: Germany Has Plaques Celebrating Hitler'], *Sme* daily, February 29, 2000.

[20] "Slota: PSNS žiada zverejnenie všetkých okolností popravy J. Tisu" ['Slota: PSNS Demands All Circumstances of J. Tiso Execution Be Public'], *SITA* news agency, April, 18, 2002.

[21] "PSNS: SNP sa položili základy komunistickej totality a sovietskej satelizácie" ['PSNS: SNP Laid Foundation of Communist Totality and Soviet Satellization'], *TASR* news agency, August 28, 2002.

[22] "SNS: Stanovisko k informáciám o oslavách 62. výročia SNP" ['SNS: Reaction to Information on 62nd SNP Anniversary Celebrations'], *SITA* news agency, August 30, 2006.

[23] Vražda, Daniel – Piško, Michal: "Fico: Vláda tvrdo zakročí proti spochybňovaniu SNP" Fico: Government Will Take Vigorous Action against Questioning SNP'], *Sme* daily, 30. 8. 2007.

Besides, the unambiguousness of officially declared anti-fascist positions of Smer is made increasingly relative by the constant support chairman Fico shows to leaders of Matica slovenská who are the most vocal advocates of the opinion stream demanding a revision of the standing official anti-fascist doctrine to interpreting the World War II period, including political rehabilitation of Jozef Tiso.

Although the HZDS has officially subscribed to the SNP legacy since its emergence, some representatives of the party's nationalist wing between 1991 and 2002 presented apologetic statements regarding the wartime Slovak state and critical views of the SNP, which put them in accord with upholders of revisionist concepts. Recently, HZDS tried to avoid taking part in the public debate on issues of wartime Slovak state and SNP; occasionally, it publishes rather general and vague positions. "Historians owe us a lot regarding the issue of [wartime] Slovak State," HZDS Chairman Vladimír Mečiar declared in 2007. Mečiar made light of the fact that positive views about the wartime Slovak state appeared increasingly frequently in Slovakia by alleging that "the entire [Czech] cabinet visited the grave of [Czech and Moravia Protectorate's President Emil] Hácha and the entire Hungarian cabinet visited the grave of [Hungary's Regent Miklós] Horthy". According to Mečiar, the issue of "the first Slovak Republic" should not be turned into an acute political issue.[24]

Symptomatic for Smer is its evaluation of the country's communist past. Here, the party applies a 'balanced' approach, which combines general acknowledgment of the fact that the pre-November regime was undemocratic with frequent assertions that communism was socially more just and provided greater social security to citizens. When comparing the existing regime to the communist one, party leaders tend to emphasize negative phenomena of the country's post-November development.

In 2003, Fico declared that the communist regime was more socially-oriented and that people were better off during communist times. While acknowledging that the Velvet Revolution of November 1989 did bring about important political and civil rights, he claimed that these rights had become merely formal, which was the biggest disappointment. Fico believes that strong financial groups and corporations have seized control over Slovakia and that people's standards of living are worse today than they were under the communist regime. Also, he is convinced that the Velvet Revolution was a classic political coup d'état that had been prepared long before from the outside – as opposed to from within Czechoslovakia – and that students and other citizens were brought to the streets to make an impression of the masses demanding changes.[25] When evaluating certain symbolic events related to the communist regime (e.g. the anniversary of the communist putsch in February 1948), Smer opts for 'emergency exits' such as the declaration in which the party claimed that it "looks into the future and leaves evaluation of historic events up to historians. Everything negative in the past should be condemned and everything positive should be made an example of".[26]

3.3. Issues related to ethnic minorities

An important indicator of political actors' preference of certain types of social interactions is their relation to ethnic minorities, evaluation of their status and role in the country's life, per-

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[24] "Mečiar: V otázke slovenského štátu nám historici veľa dlhujú" ['Mečiar: Historians Owe a Lot to the Slovak State Issue'], *SITA* news agency, January 8, 2007.

[25] "Fico: Komunizmus bol sociálnejší a ľudia sa mali lepšie" ['Fico: Communism Was More Socially-Oriented and People Were Better Off'], *SITA* news agency, November 17, 2003.

[26] "Anketa: „Čo pre vás znamená 25. február 1948?" ['Poll: What Does February 25, 1948, Mean to You?'], *Sme* daily, February 23, 2008.

ception of their problems and the degree of empathy and inclusiveness that show on the declaratory level as well as in everyday practical policies.

3.3.1. Relations to ethnic Hungarians

Perhaps the most important minority issue in Slovakia in terms of political implications is the one related to the status of ethnic Hungarians who form the country's largest ethnic minority. In spite of perceptible differences, attitudes of incumbent ruling parties to the issue show some important common features. Most importantly, it is their confrontational perception of Slovak-Hungarian interethnic relations in their entire historic perspective, demonstrative vigilance with respect to Hungarians, camouflaged or overt preference of the model of excluding ethnic Hungarians on the level of adopting political decisions on the national level.

Of all relevant parties in Slovakia, the most hostile attitudes to ethnic Hungarians are presented by the SNS. Its leaders question the very existence of this ethnic community on Slovakia's territory, arguing that this part of Slovakia's population is the product of language assimilation of autochthonous Slavic inhabitants by immigrant Hungarians. In 2004, SNS Chairman Ján Slota called ethnic Hungarians "Slovaks who speak Hungarian"[27]; in January 2008, he declared that "there are no Hungarians living in Slovakia as they all are in fact Slovaks who express themselves in Hungarian. A great number of them are Magyarized Slovaks".[28]

Ethnic Hungarians are portrayed as disloyal to the state and a potential source of danger to the majority nation; most majority political leaders do not trust them and suspect them of intentions whose principal objective is to harm the majority nation. This distrust is overtly advertised by SNS leaders and becomes their main tool of political mobilization; for instance, Slota declared in 2002 that he never had and never would believe ethnic Hungarians because "these people will always view Slovakia as their Highland ("Felvidék") and will always give their best to devouring it back".[29] The entire community is attributed negative qualities, for instance that "they are obsessed with autonomy", "they strive for dominance", etc.; consequently, legitimate demands of ethnic Hungarians' political representation are *a priori* ascribed worst possible connotations.

A certain leitmotif in national populists' relation to ethnic Hungarians is the conviction that participation of ethnic Hungarians' representatives in administering public affairs is risky for government and poses a threat to interests of the country as such, the Slovaks as the majority nation, operability of government institutions and the country's territorial integrity because they will always work in favor of neighboring Hungary and its foreign policy doctrine. It is this issue to which SNS and Smer attitudes show certain similarities, although the latter party tends to apply a rather *ad hoc* and selective approach.

"If we fail to eliminate Hungarians from decision-making leverages, not only in the Slovak Government and [the National Council of the Slovak Republic] but also in regional parliaments and local self-governments where they already smother Slovaks' development, they will definitively cut off the Slovaks from political power in Southern Slovakia," Slota de-

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[27] "Slotova zjednotená národná strana: K oslavám maďarskej revolúcie" ['Slota's United National Party on Celebrations of Hungarian Revolution'], *SITA* news agency, March 14, 2004.

[28] "Slota poprel menšiny" ['Slota Defied Minorities'], *Sme* daily, January 5, 2008.

[29] "Slota: Medzištátnu zmluvu medzi SR a MR treba vypovedať" ['Slota: Bilateral Treaty between Slovakia and Hungary Should Be Cancelled'], *SITA* news agency, January 7, 2002.

clared in July 2004.[30] Several weeks later, he claimed that "unless somebody in the Slovak Government puts an end to SMK efforts to proclaim autonomy of [southern territories], Slovakia will lose these territories within a year. We are finished without Southern Slovakia and it might just happen that Slovakia will perish amongst Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary".[31] According to Slota, ethnic Hungarians systematically strive to gain economic dominance, which is why they lobby for restitutions of land ("They want to penetrate into our national consciousness – the Tatras"[32]) and gain increasing influence within Slovak economy ("Enterprises and banks find themselves in Hungarian hands."[33]). According to SNS leaders, Slovaks from Southern Slovakia feel like an "oppressed minority". In 2006, SNS Vice-Chairwoman Anna Belousovová declared "it is the utmost time to bring the situation in Southern Slovakia from head to feet" and said that Slovakia should forward the slogan of "one nation, one country, and one language".[34]

The same rhetoric on the danger the Hungarians (i.e. without distinguishing between ethnic Hungarians and Hungarian citizens) pose to Slovakia's integrity was used by Smer during the political debate on Hungary's Status Law (Law on ethnic Hungarians living Abroad) "[The administration of Mikuláš Dzurinda] assists Hungarians in their step-by-step coordinated endeavor aimed at strengthening their position in Southern Slovakia from the inside as well as from the outside. Smer will not idly watch the game whose long-term goal is restoration of Great Hungary and once it becomes part of government it will prevent implementation of those provisions of the law on foreign Hungarians that only benefit one category of Slovak citizens," declared Robert Fico in June 2001 while presenting his party's negative position on the law.[35] "Due to its defeatist attitude to the international community, the government gradually loses actual influence over [the country's] southern territory," Fico charged. In February 2004, Fico did not hesitate to present Slovakia's integration ambitions in a telling context by declaring that "fruition of irredentist efforts will not be far once [the country] joins the EU" and expressed anxiety over strengthening these tendencies, arguing that importance of state borders would decline upon EU accession.[36]

The HZDS apparently shared Fico's anxiety over Slovakia losing sovereignty in its southern territories as an inevitable consequence of implementing the law on foreign Hungarians. A telling example of how HZDS leaders perceive mutual relations between Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians is a statement by MP Ján Kovarčík (HZDS) who declared in January 2006 that the cabinet's official report on combating violence, intolerance and extremism lacked a reference to minority's extremism with respect to the majority.[37] According to Kovarčík, the Hungarian minority in Southern Slovakia brings psychological pressure to bear on local Slovaks.

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[30] "Slota: Oslavovať nielen odchod Turkov, ale aj politický odchod Maďarov" ['Slota: Celebrate Not Only Departure of the Turks but also Political Departure of the Hungarians'], *SITA* news agency, July 25, 2004.

[31] "Slota: O rok bude Slovensko bez južných území" ['Slota: Slovakia Will Lose Its Southern Territory within a Year'], *SITA* news agency, August 12, 2004.

[32] "SNS: Proti vráteniu slovenskej pôdy fašistickým kolaborantom" ['SNS: Against Returning Slovak Soil to Fascist Collaborators'], *SITA* news agency, June 12, 2003.

[33] "Slota: Maďari získavajú čoraz väčší vplyv v slovenskom hospodárstve" ['Slota: Hungarians Gain Increasing Control over Slovakia's Economy'], *SITA* news agency, May 31, 2003.

[34] "SNS: Po voľbách chcú zrevidovať práva menšín" ['SNS: Aims to Reduce Minority Rights after Elections'], *SITA* news agency, February 16, 2006.

[35] "Fico: Smer odmieta zákon o zahraničných Maďaroch, lebo poškodzuje SR" ['Fico: Smer Refuses Foreign Hungarians Act because It Harms Slovakia'], *SITA* news agency, June 21, 2001.

[36] "Smer: Znepokojený extrémistickými názormi poslanca SMK M. Duraya" ['Smer: Concerned by Extremist Views of SMK Deputy Miklós Duray'], *SITA* news agency, February 18, 2004.

[37] "Kovarčík: Nikde sa nehovorí o extrémizme menšiny k väčšine" ['Kovarčík: Nobody Speaks of Minority's Extremism with Respect to Majority'], *SITA* news agency, January 17, 2006.

3.3.2. Perception of minority rights' implementation

An important part of society's attitude to ethnic minorities is perception of their rights' implementation (i.e. awareness of the general *status quo*, acknowledgment of their requirements' legitimacy, etc.), legislative initiatives and practical measures in the field of minority rights' implementation. In this respect, all three parties of the incumbent ruling coalition are in conspicuous accord, which stems from their shared conviction that Slovakia's ethnic minorities in general and the Hungarian minority in particular enjoy adequate rights whose standard is better than in many other EU member states; that ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia are privileged compared to members of other ethnic minorities; that further improvement in their status is not necessary; and that complying with certain demands aimed at improving minority rights' implementation (e.g. adoption of a special law on the status of minorities or concrete measures in the field of education, culture and use of native languages) would harm or even discriminate against the majority nation.

When commenting on the *status quo* and the most viable model of implementing minority rights in Slovakia, all ruling parties tend to incline to assimilation methods. Their representatives often compare the situation in the field of implementing minority rights in Slovakia and Hungary in order to draw a conclusion that ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia enjoy a much higher standard of rights than ethnic Slovaks living in Hungary. In line with this logic, some of them advocate the reciprocity principle which, if implemented in practice, would amount to reducing the standard of minority rights in Slovakia.

Political programs of incumbent ruling parties are free of any proposals aimed at improving the standard of minority rights; in fact, they show a rather opposite tendency. For instance, SNS Vice-Chairwoman Anna Belousovová declared in early 2006 that the SNS would revise the standard of minority rights if it succeeds in the 2006 elections. She claimed that even if Slovakia reduced currently guaranteed minority rights to one fifth, it would still comply with European standards.[38]

In November 2007, Head of SNS Parliamentary Caucus Rafael Rafaj reiterated that ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia enjoyed greater rights compared to other minorities whose problems were allegedly neglected by previous administrations. MP Dušan Jarjabek (HZDS) declared in 2004 that the rights of Slovakia's ethnic minorities exceeded the required standards and passing a special law on minorities would therefore be pointless. In fact, Jarjabek argued, discrimination against members of the majority inhabiting areas dominated by members of minority is becoming an increasing problem.[39] In the same year, Member of European Parliament Sergej Kozlík (HZDS) expressed his conviction that "ethnic minorities in Slovakia enjoy standard rights and in some areas they even gained above-standard rights".[40]

The opinion that the status of members of ethnic minorities in Slovakia exceeds the required standard is repeatedly advocated by Robert Fico. "Even Germany, France or Great Britain could not comply with the [minority rights] standard we introduced," he said in 2000.[41] "Legal and actual situation of members of ethnic minorities in Slovakia is generally

[38] "SNS: Po voľbách chcú zrevidovať práva menšín" ['SNS: Aims to Reduce Minority Rights after Elections'], *SITA* news agency, February 16, 2006.

[39] "Národnostné menšiny chcú mať právnu istotu" ['Ethnic Minorities Want Legal Security'] (an interview of Márius Kopcsay with MP for HZDS Dušan Jarjabek), *Národná obroda* daily, May 18, 2004.

[40] "SMK si našla na voličov emotívnu kompenzáciu" ['SMK Found Emotional Compensation for Voters'], (an interview of Martin Čambalík with MEP for HZDS Sergej Kozlík), *Národná obroda* daily, July 24, 2004.

[41] "Fico: Vláda by mala zaujať odmietavý postoj k rezolúcii EP o autonómii" ['Fico: Cabinet Should Take Negative Stance to EP Resolution on Autonomy'], *SITA* news agency, October 6, 2000.

above-standard and may serve as an example for the whole world," he said four years later.[42] He reiterated that Slovakia "introduced above-standard rights for members of the Hungarian minority that are implemented at the expense of minority rights of non-Hungarian citizens inhabiting ethnically mixed territories as they are literally discriminatory and essentially assimilating".[43]

All three parties of the incumbent administration opposed plans to establish a university for Hungarian students in Komárno. Smer refused the idea of creating a separate higher education institution for ethnic Hungarian students from the very outset. In 2001, one of Smer cofounders and now Deputy Prime Minister Dušan Čaplovič criticized a proposal to open a faculty designed to train Hungarian pedagogues at University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra, calling it "the ultimate part of the renewed agenda of the Hungarian ethnic minority's political representation". According to Čaplovič, the proposal's practical implementation would amount to introduction of "an undeniable element of ethnic exclusivity and segregation".[44] In 2002, Čaplovič declared that establishing a Hungarian university in Slovakia was pointless and unviable and called "building universities on the ethnic principle" an anachronism in the EU context.[45] A year later, he charged that the efforts to establish a Hungarian university in Komárno clearly falls within the framework of activities "threatening our country's integrity" that according to him will lead "to even greater segregation of the Hungarian ethnic minority" and will cause "its complete isolation in a Hungarian language ghetto".[46] "For Slovak money, we will educate university professionals for future Great Hungary," commented SNS Chairman Ján Slota.[47]

Čaplovič presented generally negative views on demands of ethnic Hungarians' political representatives. In 2001, he published an article bearing a symptomatic headline "*Diskriminácia vo vlastnom štáte*" ['Discriminated against in Own State'] in which he argued that "by making concessions to SMK demands the [Dzurinda] administration subscribes to creating a homogeneous language and cultural ghetto in Southern Slovakia". Čaplovič urged the cabinet to stop "looking on while the Slovaks are increasingly discriminated against in their own country".[48]

Smer particularly fiercely criticized SMK leaders' reflections on a possibility to reduce the law-stipulated quorum for using ethnic minorities' native languages in official contact. In 2003, Deputy Prime Minister Pál Csáky (SMK) proposed measures aimed at implementing the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages; they included a proposal to reduce the share of ethnic minorities' members allowed to use their mother tongue in official contact alongside with Slovak language from 20% to 10% of municipality's inhabitants. Čaplovič argued that implementation of the proposed measures would lead to discrimination against 90 percent of the country's population; he called arguments about the necessity to protect inter-

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[42] "Smer: SR nevznikla preto, aby sa v Národnej rade rokovalo po maďarsky" ['Smer: The Slovak Republic Did Not Emerge in Order for National Council to Deliberate in Hungarian'], *SITA* news agency, July 21, 2004.

[43] "Fico: Vláda umožňuje SMK postupne asimilovať Slovákov na juhu" ['Fico: Cabinet Allows SMK to Assimilate Slovaks at the South'], *SITA* news agency, July 28, 2004.

[44] Čaplovič, Dušan: "Etnická hra SMK o novú fakultu" ['SMK's Ethnic Game over New Faculty'], *Národná obroda* daily, January 26, 2001.

[45] "Čaplovič: Vytvorenie maďarskej univerzity je zbytočné" ['Čaplovič: Founding Hungarian University Pointless'], *SITA* news agency, October 11, 2002.

[46] "Smer: Samochvála slovenskej diplomacie smrdí podporou asimilácie" ['Smer: Self-Praise of Slovak Diplomacy Smells of Supporting Assimilation'], *SITA* news agency, July 22, 2003.

[47] "SNS: Nehoráznosť SMK pokračuje" ['SNS: SMK Rubbish Continues'], *SITA* news agency, September 21, 2004.

[48] Čaplovič, Dušan: "Diskriminácia vo vlastnom štáte" ['Discriminated against in Own State'], *Národná obroda* daily, February 17, 2001.

ests of other minorities a "cloak" and charged that SMK leaders in fact "pursue purely Hungarian interests".[49] According to Čaplovič, the eventual result of implementing Csáky's proposals will be that the regional parliament in the "Slovak cradle" of Nitra will hold deliberations in Hungarian.[50]

At the same time, Čaplovič emphatically rejected the idea of passing a specific law on ethnic minorities, accusing the SMK of ambitions to build a state within a state and enforce collective rights of minorities. Smer leader Robert Fico was even blunter in rejecting the mentioned proposal. He labeled it a display of "expansiveness of a nationalist party" that pursues its "nationalist agenda" and wrings concessions out of the rest of the ruling coalition.[51]

An emblematic example of national populists' concept of implementing minority rights was a dispute over national history and geography textbooks for ethnic Hungarian students of secondary schools. Education Minister Ján Mikolaj (SNS) ordered that Slovak geographical names be inserted into the Hungarian text, which contradicted grammatical rules of the Hungarian language and *de facto* devalued the textbooks but more importantly it radically intervened with the existing practice of over 50 yeas back. SNS and Smer representatives insisted that Slovak geographical names must have priority over minority languages in textbooks for minority pupils, although textbooks for other ethnic minorities continued to feature geographical names in native languages only.

The most frequent argument used by advocates of secondary school textbooks' language hybridization was the necessity to "improve Hungarian pupils' command of the Slovak language", which was nonsense from a didactic viewpoint. In fact, the proposal motivated by revanchism and assimilation was supposed to demonstrate the majority nation's superiority in the field of implementing rights of the largest ethnic minority's members in the most authentic area that affects formation of ethnic identity, namely the use of the native language.

3.3.3. Perception of the issue of Slovak-Hungarian historic reconciliation

The three ruling parties show remarkable closeness of positions regarding issues of Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation, possible remedy of historic wrongs and evaluation of historical events that are considered neuralgic spots of mutual relations. The closeness rests in refusing the idea of mutual apology, nursing feelings of grave (in some cases even irreparable) injustice caused by the Hungarians and presenting persistent demands that the Hungarian nation (including ethnic Hungarians) and the Hungarian government apologize for all historical wrongs. Their representatives seek to demonstrate firmness of this position by putting forth proposals designed to affirm certain acts of retributive nature the Hungarian side perceives as unjust and harmful. Some Slovaks' individual attempts to express regret over past tragedies or even apologize for them were emphatically rejected by leaders of national-populist forces.

When interpreting the historical context of Slovak-Hungarian relations, representatives of national-populist forces emphasize tribulations of the Slovaks and highlight injustices done by the Hungarians. In 2002, Slota called on three supreme constitutional officials (i.e. president, prime minister and parliament chairman) to demand from their Hungarian counterparts an apology for all historical wrongs and "the long-term process of creeping assimilative genocide

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[49] "Smer: Odmietajú návrh zmien pri používaní menšinových jazykov" ['Smer: Refuses Proposed Changes to Use of Minority Languages'], *SITA* news agency, August 15, 2003.

[50] "Fico: Vláda umožňuje SMK postupne asimilovať Slovákov na juhu" ['Fico: Cabinet Allows SMK to Assimilate Slovaks at the South'], *SITA* news agency, July 28, 2004.

[51] "Fico: Koalícia chystá ďalší ústupok voči SMK za podporu rozpočtu" ['Fico: Coalition Prepares another Concession to SMK for Supporting State Budget'], *SITA* news agency, November 19, 2003.

of many generations of the Slovak nation by Great Hungarian policies". On this occasion, Slota presented a long list of historical wrongs including systematic assimilation, forcible Magyarization, abductions of Slovak children by the FEMKE society for Magyarization purposes, forced abolition of Matica slovenská and three Slovak secondary grammar schools, the Černová tragedy, imprisonment of Slovak nationalists and human rights activists, invasion of Hungarian Bolsheviks in 1919, annexing Slovakia's southern territories by Horthy's Hungary, etc.[52]

In 2007, already as a ruling party, the SNS demanded the Hungarian parliament to apologize for the Černová massacre and other historical injustices, claiming that this act on the part of Hungary is the basic prerequisite to potential Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation. The SNS sees the reason behind the Černová tragedy in Great Hungarian chauvinism that "lingers on in Hungary's official representatives and political circles as well as their SMK acolytes".[53]

The SNS repeatedly tried to make parliament hold a special vote to confirm the unalterable status of Beneš decrees. Its attempts from 2002 and 2005 were unsuccessful. In 2002, Slota declared that he would like to "dust Beneš decrees" in order to "let those who wish to own Hungarian passports promptly leave Slovakia's territory via its southern border".[54] In an interview for the *Lidové noviny* Czech daily published in 2006, Slota said he envied the Czechs for getting rid of ethnic Germans based on Beneš decrees; the interview's context suggested that his envy ensued from the fact that Slovakia did not manage to do the same with ethnic Hungarians.[55]

The SNS finally succeeded in 2007 when massive political support of the HZDS and Smer and an accommodating approach on the part of Slovak opposition parties made parliament pass a resolution on the unalterable status of the Beneš decrees, which subsequently had negative effects on Slovak-Hungarian relations. While its officially presented objective was to confirm the unalterable nature of the post-war arrangement in Central Europe, the SNS used the ensuing public debate on the Beneš decrees to advertise its own concept of the best model of Slovak-Hungarian coexistence.

Although the HZDS used more moderate rhetoric regarding the Beneš decrees, its general views of the reasons, circumstances and implications of the entire issue did not differ much from those of the SNS. In 2004, its chairman Vladimír Mečiar publicly advocated additional confirmation of the Beneš decrees by endorsing a proposal that a resolution on the unalterable status of the decrees be included in the accession treaty between the Slovak Republic and the EU. According to the HZDS, the post-war resettlement of ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia's territory was not endorsed by Slovak official organs and was organized solely on the basis of the Beneš decrees, which is why the Slovak nation is neither responsible for nor guilty of the act. Party leaders argued that a public apology would amount to admission of guilt. In 2007, Mečiar said that resettlement of ethnic Hungarians after World War II was the country's "internal problem". While admitting violation of concrete persons' individual rights, he said that compensating the resettled victims would be unthinkable, arguing it was not forced resettlement but repatriation of population in compliance with an international agreement. "The Slo-

[52] "Slota: Odoslali listy Schusterovi, Migašovi a Kukanovi kvôli Maďarom" ['Slota: Letters over Hungarians Sent to Schuster, Migaš and Kukan'], *SITA* news agency, March 20, 2002.

[53] "Černová: Príčinou tragédie bol podľa Slotu veľkomaďarský šovinizmus" ['Černová: Slota Blamed Tragedy on Great Hungarian Chauvinism'] *SITA* news agency, October 27, 2007.

[54] "Slota by rád oprášil Benešove dekréty" ['Slota Would Like to Renew Beneš Decrees'], *Sme* daily, March 12, 2002.

[55] "Vyhnání Němců vám závidím" ['I Envy You for Expulsion of Germans'] (an interview of Luboš Palata with SNS Chairman Ján Slota), *Lidové noviny* daily, July 22, 2006.

vaks will not accept imposing the feeling of guilt for World War II events upon them," he said.[56]

Smer leaders also presented unambiguous positions on the issue of the Beneš decrees, circumstances of their implementation and implications for ethnic Hungarians. In September 2006, Čaplovič declared that Hungarians were not deported from Slovakia after World War II but repatriated back to their fatherland based on an agreement between the Czechoslovak Republic and Hungary.[57] A year later, Smer Vice-Chairman and Culture Minister Marek Maďarič claimed that "victims are mistaken for culprits in the case of Beneš decrees", adding that resettled ethnic Hungarians were citizens of another state at the time of resettlement.[58]

Not a single ruling party endorsed the idea of a joint declaration in which the Slovaks and the Hungarians would offer mutual apologies. All three parties' leaders resolutely rejected such a document drafted by the SMK in 2007. SNS Chairman Ján Slota charged that a document on mutual Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation was not necessary as it was "the Hungarians who should apologize to the Slovaks". HZDS Chairman Vladimír Mečiar pointed out five invasions of Hungarian troops to Slovakia's territory in the 20th century and said he never heard a word of apology from the Hungarian Government for any of them. "We would gladly hear an apology for Magyarization, Slovakia's occupation [during World War II] as well as for 1968", he said.[59] Smer Chairman Robert Fico called the SMK proposal a "complete audacity". "I really can't see what the Slovaks should apologize for."[60]

3.3.4. Relations to political representation of ethnic Hungarians

The common feature of national-populist parties in Slovakia is their negative relation to political representation of ethnic Hungarians, namely the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK). It is a relevant political subject and a formidable political opponent of the SNS, the HZDS and Smer, which is why their perception of this party logically features elements of political competition and power struggle.[61] But most importantly, the party is the only relevant representative of Slovakia's largest ethnic minority.

The displays of ruling parties' negative perception of the SMK range from denying its right to existence to questioning its legitimacy as the representative of Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians, refusing its representation in government and accusing its leaders of various wicked intentions, efforts and acts that ensue from the very fact that they represent ethnic Hungarians. While the three ruling parties differ in terms of radicalism, they all basically strive to create

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[56] "Mečiar: Vysídlenie Maďarov je naša záležitosť" ['Mečiar: Resettlement of Hungarians Is Our Business'], *TASR* news agency, October 16, 2007.

[57] "Čaplovič: Plánovaná výstava v EP je proti dobrým vzťahom SR a MR" ['Čaplovič: Planned Exhibition in EP Harms Good Relations between Slovakia and Hungary'], *SITA* news agency, September 11, 2006.

[58] "Joj: SMK si pri Benešových dekrétoch zamieňa obeť s vinníkom" ['TV Joj: SMK Confuses Victim for Culprit Regarding Beneš Decrees'], September 9, 2007.

[59] "ĽS-HZDS: Vznik polovojenských oddielov považuje za fašizáciu" ['ĽS-HZDS: Considers Founding of Paramilitary Units Fascization'], *SITA* news agency, September 8, 2007.

[60] "Fico: Požadovať od Slovákov ospravedlnenie je úplná drzosť" ['Fico: Demanding Apology from Slovaks Is Pure Audacity'], *SITA* news agency, September 10, 2007.

[61] The program and political profile of the SMK and views of its leaders are not the focus of the present analysis, mostly because the SMK is not a political actor of the national-populist type. Although some party officials present rather radical views regarding select issues (particularly the issue of various forms of autonomy), this party that relies on the phenomenon of ethnic Hungarians' ethnic voting patterns remains primarily a moderate non-populist political force. In order to examine the relation between activities of the SMK and those of Slovak national-populist parties (including interaction patterns between the SMK and parties of incumbent administration) would require a separate analysis.

the image of a political enemy that seeks its own benefits regardless of the country's interests and undermines the foundations of its statehood in alliance with a foreign power.

The SNS presents the most radical attitudes with respect to the SMK. It is this area where incompatibility of the party's political creed with liberal democracy principles is the most obvious. The SNS combines criticism of the SMK with proposals to adopt repressive measures with respect to the party and its representatives. Under various pretexts, the SNS repeatedly demanded outlawing the SMK. In 2002, after MP Miklós Duray (SMK) spoke during an election rally of the Fidesz party in Hungary, SNS Chairman Slota filed a motion with the General Attorney's Office proposing to outlaw the SMK on grounds it pursued activities aimed at "disrupting the state". In 2004, Slota again demanded a ban on the SMK. In 2005, he announced he had filed a motion to abolish the SMK because it prepared to proclaim autonomy in southern Slovakia and subsequent annexation of the territory to Hungary. Slota declared that one of his party's principal political objectives was to "put an end to Hungarian irredentists' expansiveness" and "outlaw the SMK".[62] In 2006, Slota demanded that the SMK be "deleted from the list of registered political parties".

The SNS portrays the SMK as a heterogeneous element that is dangerous to Slovakia and an agent of alien and hostile interests. The party hysterically opposed the decision to invite the SMK to participate in government after the 1998 parliamentary elections, calling it "a threat to Slovakia's vital national and state interests". It dubbed nomination of SMK representatives to regional executive organs a risk of relinquishing real power into the hands of those who fancy the concept of restoring the Great Hungary. After the party's election fiasco in 2002, chairman Slota condemned participation of the SMK in the ruling coalition, stating that "Hungarians now have an open range for their irredentist goals".[63]

When referring to the SMK, SNS leaders use only the most awful attributes and negative characteristics such as "a super-nationalistic, extremist and Great Hungarian chauvinist party whose program objective is to liquidate Slovak statehood"; "a subject of importing instability and irredentism into the region of central Europe"; a party that disseminates "political racism by deliberately fuelling ethnic resentment", uses "terrorism methods" and "turns ethnic Hungarians … into hostages of its irredentist policy"; a party whose "actual objective is political autonomy of southern Slovakia"; "an extended arm of Fidesz that supports the [extremist] Jobbik party"; a party that "opposes existence of the sovereign Slovak Republic" and whose "eventual goal is territorial separation"; a party that intends to "question the Treaty of Trianon and confirm the Vienna Awards". In interpretation of SNS leaders, the SMK embodies the archenemy of Slovakia and the Slovaks.

The HZDS has also demonstrated its distrust to the SMK for quite some time. HZDS leaders are convinced that SMK's political line "is based on playing the Hungarian card" and publicly question its loyalty to the Slovak Republic. In 2004, Member of European Parliament (MEP) Sergej Kozlík (HZDS) fuelled existing doubts over allegiance of MEPs for SMK to Slovakia by claiming it was quite possible that they would form an alliance with radicals from Fidesz.[64] In 2005, party chairman Mečiar declared that the SMK is "more nationalistic than before"; a year later, a couple of months before parliamentary elections, he charged that SMK Chairman Béla Bugár had lobbied the Hungarian Government to "stand up for autonomy of

[62] "SNS: Priority SMK nie sú slovenskými, ale maďarskými prioritami" ['SNS: SMK Priorities Are Not Slovak but Hungarian Priorities'], *SITA* news agency, January 9, 2005.

[63] "PSNS: Obavy pravých národniarov z účasti SMK vo vláde" ['PSNS: True Nationalists Fear SMK Government Participation'], *SITA* news agency, September 25, 2002.

[64] "SMK si našla na voličov emotívnu kompenzáciu" ['SMK Found Emotional Compensation for Voters'], (an interview of Martin Čambalík with MEP for HZDS Sergej Kozlík), *Národná obroda* daily, July 24, 2004.

the Hungarian minority in Slovakia".[65] In June 2006, MP Ján Kovarčík (HZDS) filed a complaint with the Central Election Commission regarding an SMK billboard in Hungarian on grounds of violating the law on state language, which was in line with the party's nationalism-motivated mobilization activities before the 2006 elections. After the elections, the HZDS accused the SMK of making an "ethnic problem" out of the standard process of replacing political nominees in local state administration in southern Slovakia after elections, which is "yet another example of how the SMK abuses the Hungarian card".[66]

Compared to HZDS officials, Smer leaders took a much more radical stance on top political representatives of the Hungarian ethnic minority. They repeatedly labeled the SMK an "ethnic" and "nationalistic" party that is "disloyal" to the Slovak Republic; they described political goals pursued by the party as "anti-Slovak", "destabilizing", "two-faced" and "dangerous". "[The SMK] behaves as if it did not link its voters' future to Slovakia," said party chairman Robert Fico in 2000. "The SMK is only concerned about problems of the Hungarian minority. For the SMK, Slovakia ends at the northern border of the Nitra region."[67] Unlike SNS leaders, top representatives of Smer avoided using the term "collaborationism" to describe cooperation of centre-right parties with the SMK between 1998 and 2006; nevertheless, they perceived the SMK's participation in government clearly negatively.

Smer *a priori* refused often legitimate political demands and proposals presented by SMK leaders, trying to interpret them through the prism of allegedly negative intentions and insinuating their ethnic bias. In 2004, Fico stated that the SMK strove to deprive the Slovak Government of "influence on the territory of southern Slovakia, coordinating its policies with the far-right nationalistic Fidesz party".[68] According to Fico, the [Dzurinda] administration lets the SMK "gradually assimilate Slovaks from the south. Government waived control over southern Slovakia and relinquished it to the Hungarian minority, not only in local state administration, self-governance organs, education and culture but even in the judiciary".[69]

Attempts to associate the SMK with aspirations to restore the Great Hungary regularly appear in public statements presented by Smer leaders, sometimes in a very concrete context or form. "You will only be happy once Budapest becomes your capital," Dušan Čaplovič told Miklós Duray in a televised debate in 2005. "You look far into the future and if the European Union collapsed for whatever reasons some 50 years from now, you would be only too happy to proclaim the Great Hungary again."[70] In October 2008, Čaplovič described SMK policies as "increasingly extremist, anti-Slovak and anti-European in many respects, particularly when it comes to furthering ethnic and nationalist concepts of tackling the status of [ethnic Hungarians] and promoting Hungarianism in the so-called Carpathian basin. In the background of these efforts smells the decayed concept of the right to ancient fatherland…"[71]

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[65] "Mečiar: Bugár apeloval na maďarskú vládu v súvislosti s autonómiou" ['Mečiar: Bugár Appealed to Hungarian Cabinet Regarding Autonomy'], *SITA* news agency, March 19, 2006.

[66] "ĽS-HZDS: SMK chráni len svojich politických nominantov" ['ĽS-HZDS: SMK Covers Only Its Political Nominees'], *SITA* news agency, July 11, 2006.

[67] "Smer: SMK ohrozuje spolunažívanie Slovákov a Maďarov" ['Smer: SMK Threatens Coexistence of Slovaks and Hungarians'], *SITA* news agency, August 25, 2000.

[68] "Smer: SMK sa snaží, aby vláda stratila vplyv na juhu Slovenska" ['Smer: SMK Strives to Deprive Government of Leverage over Southern Slovakia'], *Národná obroda* daily, July 29, 2004.

[69] "Fico: Vláda umožňuje SMK postupne asimilovať Slovákov na juhu" ['Fico: Cabinet Allows SMK to Assimilate Slovaks at the South'], *SITA* news agency, July 28, 2004.

[70] "Čaplovič o Durayovi: spokojný budete, keď vašim hlavným mestom bude Budapešť" ['Čaplovič to Duray: You Will Only Be Happy after Budapest Becomes Your Capital'], *TASR* news agency, January 30, 2005.

[71] Čaplovič, Dušan: "Spory alebo spolupráca" ['Contention or Cooperation'], *Hospodárske noviny* daily, October 17, 2008.

3.3.5. Attitudes to bilateral Slovak-Hungarian relations

Bilateral Slovak-Hungarian relations have a specific place in communication and mobilization strategies as well as practical policies of national populist parties. This issue forms an important part of the domestic political discourse as well as public debates on various aspects of national history and interethnic relations. In communication with their voters, national populists typically use a 'bloc' approach as they construct an imaginary coherent bloc that includes ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia, their political representation (i.e. the SMK), the Hungarians as a nation, Hungary as a country, the Hungarian Government and other government institutions and Hungary's entire political scene. As a general rule, the more radical the position of national populists the less differentiated this imaginary construct becomes.

All three parties of the incumbent ruling coalition tend to perceive bilateral Slovak-Hungarian relations through the prism of interstate rivalry or confrontation; on the other hand, the element of cooperation is either absent, pushed to the background or presented in politically expedient ways in order to justify their own negative positions. They reiterate the motive of national victimization and publicly accuse Hungary of ambitions to intervene with Slovakia's domestic developments, introduce autonomy in cooperation with the country's ethnic Hungarians and gain control over parts of its territory by using a multitude of methods including irredentist ones. Part of national populists' interpretation of mutual relations between Hungary and neighboring countries is the thesis of lingering expansionism of Hungary's state policy with respect to its neighbors; the most radical national populists even admit the possibility of a military conflict involving Slovakia and Hungary.

SNS leaders often made it abundantly clear that a complete absence of Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations would suit them. Ján Slota described Hungary's foreign policy as "Great Hungarian", "criminal" and "chauvinist". After Hungary passed the so-called Status Law in 2002, a group of SNS deputies loyal to Slota submitted a proposal to renounce the Basic Treaty on Good Neighborly Relations and Friendly Cooperation between Slovakia and Hungary; later, Slota repeatedly proposed to terminate the said treaty. Slota called on the cabinet to withdraw Slovakia's ambassador from Budapest and suspend diplomatic relations with Hungary should the Hungarian Government refuse to accept Slovak demands regarding implementation of Hungary's Status Law on Slovakia's territory; he presented similar demands also in 2003 and 2004. After Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány spoke of autonomy in 2005, Slota again proposed to suspend diplomatic relations with Hungary and demanded that "Hungarians be kicked out of Slovakia".[72]

SNS representatives constantly fuelled the feeling that Slovakia is threatened by its southern neighbor and reiterated the necessity to defend the country and its sovereignty. Their formulations of proposals of concrete measures indicate that the party completely overlooks the fact that Slovakia and Hungary are bonded by alliance and partnership ties based on both countries' membership in the EU and NATO. "Slovak troops should protect Slovakia's southern border against autonomy instead of protecting Albanian criminals [in Kosovo] who focus on drug trafficking and white slave trade," declared party chairman Slota in 2005.[73] In August 2008 he claimed that Slovakia should intensify training of its troops in order to defend its territory against Viktor Orbán, a Hungarian politician who according to Slota intends to create another Kosovo in Slovakia. In September 2008, Slota publicly criticized plans to intensify construction of road infrastructure between Slovakia and Hungary, warning that the bridges built over the Ipeľ River may one day serve to bring armored vehicles from Hungary to Slovakia.

[72] "Slota: Podá návrh na generálnu prokuratúru na zrušenie SMK" ['Slota: Will File Motion with General Attorney's Office'], *SITA* news agency, January 20, 2005.

[73] "Slota: Južné Slovensko by mali pred autonómiou chrániť vojaci" ['Slota: Troops Should Protect Southern Slovakia against Autonomy'], *SITA* news agency, January 13, 2005.

SNS leaders strive to portray contemporary domestic political developments in Hungary in the worst possible colors. Party vice-chairwoman Belousovová stated in 2006 that "chauvinism and extremism are becoming trendy [in Hungary]". Upon founding the Hungarian Guard, an extremist paramilitary organization of Hungarian nationalists, SNS leaders actively contributed to hyperbolizing its importance and repeatedly demanded Hungarian government officials as well as SMK representatives dissociate themselves from this organization. If any social or political organization in Hungary refused to take a stance on the Hungarian Guard, SNS leaders interpreted it as direct endorsement of its existence.

The idea that Hungary's foreign policy and its relations to Slovakia ensue from long-term superpower ambitions of the Hungarian government is an integral part of Smer leaders' understanding of bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary. "The Hungarian cabinet and parliament are becoming hostages to their own fiction or vision of a united nation that is territorially connected to the never-never Great Hungary," claimed party vice-chairman Dušan Čaplovič in 2003.[74] When commenting on the adoption of Hungary's Status Law, Čaplovič said: "Smer believes the crux of the problem is long-term and deliberate endeavor of the Hungarian Republic to reunite the Great Hungary and revise [the Treaty of] Trianon."[75]

Another important part of the party's interpretation scheme is the idea that bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary are the subject of fierce political struggle in Budapest and that declared positions on Slovakia are used to measure Hungarian politicians' patriotism. "As if one of the most fashionable things in Hungary's domestic political struggle was who is more nationally-oriented and stricter on Slovakia's incumbent ruling coalition," said party chairman Fico in May 2008.[76] Shortly before, he warned that "if Fidesz wins in [the next Hungarian elections], we may expect displays of nationalism and extremism with respect to the Slovak Republic".[77] According to Fico, "the Slovaks must be prepared for various attacks […] Slovakia must stand united now".

After Hungary's Foreign Affairs Minister Kinga Göncz officially conveyed the Hungarian Government's position on the issue of inserting Slovak geographical names into textbooks for ethnic Hungarian pupils, Premier Fico called it an ultimatum he would not accept. Čaplovič reminded Göncz that "Budapest is not the capital of Slovakia anymore" and announced that Slovakia would not respond to the Hungarian note. "We will not kowtow," he said.[78]

While HZDS leaders comment on the issue of Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations less frequently and use more moderate rhetoric compared to their SNS and Smer counterparts, they also blame the opposite side or ethnic Hungarians' political representatives for emerging problems in mutual relations. At the same time, party chairman Mečiar admitted that bilateral relations are also burdened by "some unfortunate statements by Slovak politicians", a euphemism used to refer to Slota's anti-Hungarian statements.

In 2007, Mečiar declared that "deterioration in Slovak-Hungarian relations is caused by radicalization of the SMK under its new leadership and revanchist tendencies" in Hungary

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[74] "Smer: Krajanský zákon napriek novele nezmenil svoju podstatu" ['Smer: Status Law's Essence Unchanged despite Amendment'], *SITA* news agency, June 27, 2003.

[75] "Smer: Samochvála slovenskej diplomacie smrdí podporou asimilácie" ['Smer: Self-Praise of Slovak Diplomacy Smells of Supporting Assimilation'], *SITA* news agency, July 22, 2003.

[76] "Smer: Dôvody na odklad návštevy Gyurcsánya sú smiešnou zámienkou" ['Smer: Reasons to Postpone Gyurcsány's Visit a Ridiculous Pretext'], *SITA* news agency, May 17, 2008.

[77] Krempaský, Ján: "Fico varuje pred nacionalizmom" ['Fico Warns against Nationalism'], *Sme* daily, May 12, 2008.

[78] "Čaplovič: Je proti novele SMK, školám radí učiť sa zo starej vlastivedy" ['Čaplovič: Opposes SMK Amendment, Advises Schools to Teach from Old National History and Geography'], *SITA* news agency, October 7, 2008.

where Fidesz is rising to power. According to him, the principal reason behind "artificial deterioration of mutual relations between Slovakia and Hungary" is the fact that the SMK is now in opposition.[79] HZDS leaders called Hungarian politicians' public reflections on autonomy of ethnic minorities an unacceptable intervention with Slovakia's internal affairs and founding of the Hungarian Guard a display of "fascization".[80] In spite of all his criticism, Mečiar stated in October 2008 that although there were problems in bilateral relations, Hungary did not pose any real threat to Slovakia.[81]

3.3.6. Relations to Romany ethnic minority

The issue related to the status of the Roma in Slovakia has not only practical aspects that show through existence of multiple problems (a significant share of the country's Romany population lives in social exclusion) but also a side of political mobilization. The majority (i.e. non-Romany) population keeps relatively high social distance from the Roma, which is reflected in political parties' voter communication strategies. Fearing a potential loss of support from the majority electorate, many parties (including non-populist ones) try to avoid adopting positions that could be interpreted as too friendly with respect to the Roma. Populist parties, for their part, strive to use social distance from the Roma in their benefit, fuelling anti-Roma resentment and proposing measures whose implementation would further deteriorate the status of the Roma.

The most radical views of the so-called Roma issue are traditionally presented by the SNS. They fuel the majority population's feeling of danger posed by the growing and maladjusted Romany population. They emphasize specific features of Romany mentality and portray them as incompatible with that of non-Roma. They maintain that the Roma are privileged over the majority since they draw greater benefits from welfare funds compared to other citizens. SNS representatives proposed measures that could further deepen social exclusion of the Roma and their isolation from the majority society. Some of them even insinuated that the best solution would be driving the Roma out of the country.

Some SNS leaders presented overtly racist statements. In 2000, SNS Vice-Chairman Víťazoslav Móric called on the government to create reservations for maladjusted Roma. "If we don't do it now, the Gypsies will do it in 20 years for us," he said. "There is nothing illegal about creating a reservation for the Roma; after all, there are reservations for Indians in the USA. It is in Romany communities that a vast majority of mentally retarded people are born … What is human about letting one idiot father another idiot, letting mentally retarded people reproduce and the increasing the percentage of idiots and imbeciles in our nation?"[82]

In 2002 Slota, at that point leader of the PSNS, said that his party's priority was to "tackle the Gypsy issue thoroughly and promptly, [improve] law enforceability with respect to this ethnic group, change the [Roma's] philosophy of procreating children [in order to] live off welfare benefits and allowances". He promised to introduce "targeted criticism of abusing the social security system by the Gypsies, firm and vigorous measures and direct language in

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[79] "Mečiar: Vysídlenie Maďarov je naša záležitosť" ['Mečiar: Resettlement of Hungarians Is Our Business'], *TASR* news agency, October 16, 2007.

[80] "ĽS-HZDS: Vznik polovojenských oddielov považuje za fašizáciu" ['ĽS-HZDS: Considers Founding of Paramilitary Units Fascization'], *SITA* news agency, September 8, 2007.

[81] "Mečiar: Maďarský premiér chcel kedysi Žitný ostrov" ['Mečiar: Hungarian Premier Demanded Žitný ostrov Once'], Aktuálne.sk, October 8, 2008.

[82] "SNS: Národniari chcú rezervácie pre Rómov" ['SNS: Nationalists Want Reservations for the Roma'], *SITA* news agency, August 4, 2000.

identifying the problems and their causes".[83] In doing so, he used formulations such as "ethnic privileging of the Gypsies" or "bleeding the state's social security system".[84]

Symptomatic were SNS representatives' reactions to conflict situations whose actors could be (or were) Romany and non-Romany citizens. In 2002, SNS Chairman Ján Slota supported a petition drive by residents of Dobšiná village who protested against construction of social flats for the Roma. PSNS Spokesman Rafael Rafaj announced the party would on location support "civic resistance to privileging Gypsies at the expense of other [citizens]". In 2004, Slota harshly scolded Romany citizens who looted grocery stores in some east Slovak villages in reaction to introducing a new model of disbursing welfare benefits. "The raids of the vandals confirmed that a majority of [the Roma] are maladjusted, they steal and loot," he said.[85] A couple of days later, he made those who had "ignored SNS warnings and calls to tackle the Gypsy issue radically and thoroughly" morally responsible for the situation at hand.[86]

The so-called Roma issue virtually disappeared from the party's mobilization arsenal after the 2006 parliamentary elections, at least in the form it had been presented before the elections. Slota admitted he had used "wrong vocabulary" with respect to the Roma in the past. At the same time, the SNS made a friendly gesture to the Roma by signing an agreement on co-operation with one Romany organization (Parliament of Slovak Roma) and declaring its interest in tackling social problems of the Roma.

Smer representatives avoided overtly racist statements with respect to the Roma; in early stages of the party's existence, though, its leader Robert Fico formulated some views regarding the so-called Roma issue and offered some possible solutions that were reminiscent of the SNS approach. For instance, Fico tried to create an impression that the country's Romany population grew at an almost uncontrollable pace and presented this demographic trend as clearly negative and even dangerous. In 2000, he called the so-called Roma issue "a ticking time bomb", adding that his discussions with obstetricians from east Slovakia indicate that ten years from now the share of the Roma may match that of the majority population in this part of the country. Fico declared that according to his party's forecasts, the total number of Roma in Slovakia will reach 1.2 million between 2010 and 2015 and added that 800,000 of them will depend on welfare benefits.[87] Fico's comparison of the so-called Roma issue to a "ticking time bomb" provoked harsh protests by Romany organizations. The Romany Initiative of Slovakia issued a statement saying it is "appalled" at Fico's statements.[88]

On a seminar under a telling name of "Human and Minority Rights Seen Differently", Smer announced it would seek to restrict eligibility for family allowances up to a certain number of children. "The Roma are Slovak citizens and government should strictly demand them to abide by all laws," Fico said while introducing the proposal. "But government failed completely in this respect."[89]

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[83] "PSNS k cigánskej karte" ['PSNS on Gypsy Card'], *SITA* news agency, August 8, 2002.

[84] "PSNS: Pravú sebareflexiu správania sa Rómov namiesto kritiky" ['PSNS: True Self-Reflection of Roma's Behavior instead of Criticism'], *SITA* news agency, August 8, 2002.

[85] "Slota: Tvrdo odsudzuje rabovania na východe Slovenska" ['Slota: Harshly Condemns Lootings in East Slovakia'], *SITA* news agency, February 21, 2004.

[86] "Slota: Národniari k rómskemu rabovaniu" ['Slota: Nationalists on Romany Looting'], *SITA* news agency, February 24, 2004.

[87] "Fico chce obmedziť prídavky podľa počtu detí pre Rómov aj Nerómov" ['Fico Aims to Peg Allowances to Number of Children for Roma and Non-Roma'], *Sme* daily, June 9, 2000.

[88] Patkoló, Alexander: "Populista Fico" ['Fico the Populist'], *Sme* daily, June 12, 2000.

[89] Angelovič, Marián: "Fico: Rómovia môžu zruinovať sociálny systém Slovenska" ['Fico: The Roma May Ruin Slovakia's Welfare System'], *Národná obroda* daily, June 10, 2000.

Unlike the SNS or Smer in early stages of its existence, the HZDS did not attempt to use the so-called Roma issue for the purpose of voter mobilization. The sporadic displays of anti-Romany sentiment from the HZDS were individual expressions of its representatives rather than the official party line.

In recent years, the so-called Roma issue ceased to be a tool of voter mobilization. In the past, this issue was used by new political subjects seeking to drum up initial voter support (e.g. Smer) as well as by established parties seeking to cement the already existing support (e.g. SNS). It seems national populists tend to use the so-called Roma issue more intensely when in opposition, something that is not true of the so-called Hungarian issue. For national populists who are in power, this issue apparently does not offer enough possibilities to present appealing and effective rhetoric, unlike that concerning Hungarians and Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations. Besides, problems of the Romany minority have primarily a strong social dimension and require implementation of practical measures aimed at improving its overall social situation. In simpler terms, the Roma are so poor that they may hardly be deprived of anything more; on the other hand, increasing their standards of living may serve interests of the majority inhabiting localities with mixed population. The situation of the Roma differs from that of ethnic Hungarians; here, national populists rather tend to reduce the existing standard and curb those rights ethnic Hungarians already enjoy.

4. CONCLUSION

Mobilization strategies used by national populists in Slovakia after 1989 have proven sufficiently effective not only in terms of drumming up voter support and gaining a strong power position but also in influencing the public discourse and overall atmosphere in society. Long-term presence of national-populist political forces on the country's political landscape gave birth to a certain communication culture that is based on confrontation and conflict. This culture creates strong division lines between different population groups by emphasizing their collective identity as a solid bond used to distinguish themselves from other identity groups. The said method of political communication complicates the civic dialogue by its very non-dialogic nature.

On the verbal level, the national-populist appeal shows especially through confrontational attitudes with respect to members of ethnic minorities and upholders of different opinions. On the one hand, chief protagonists of this appeal have toned down their radicalism after the 2006 elections; on the other hand, patterns of the national-populist appeal began to penetrate the general public discourse on a much more massive scale compared to the period of 1998–2006. Since 2006, national populists enjoyed a much stronger power position; they strove to use it to transform their concepts of various aspects of society development into government policies, including those in the field of education, culture and ethnic minorities. In other words, adherents of radical nationalist views gained a chance to bring their ideological views from the political spectrum's margin into its centre.

Naturally, the effectiveness of national populists' mobilization strategies has an ethnic-nationalist dimension as well as a social one. Strengthening populist parties' position in Slovakia in recent years should be viewed in the context of socio-economic developments in a country that implemented thorough liberal reforms after 1998 but especially between 2002 and 2006. Some population groups' aversion to these reforms' (actual or fictitious) social effects combined with lingering anti-capitalist and anti-liberal moods created a generally favorable social environment for populists and elevated to power the segment of the political elite that is appreciated by voters for its ability to lead confrontational struggles, use militant rhetoric, expose imaginary enemies and defend collective entities national populists like to identify themselves with (i.e. people, nation or state). The nationalist appeal falls quite naturally within this formula.

For quite some time, Slovakia's public discourse in general and political discourse in particular has featured elements that do not exactly encourage the intercultural dialogue. Most importantly, it is deeply rooted vigilance with respect to the country's largest ethnic minority that is fuelled by the historic legacy as well as by contemporary social actors' efforts to capitalize on this vigilance on a number of levels (e.g. education, culture, party politics, international relations and foreign policy, etc.). Secondly, it is the lingering preference of the national state that is defined purely ethnically. Thirdly, it is ambivalence in perceiving certain key events of the Slovaks' national history. Last but not least, it is relatively high voter support for political forces that use confrontation as the principal tool of achieving the set goals, including the type of confrontation that has a potential to mobilize large population groups.

Since the national-populist type of appealing to voters and preference of confrontational policies is deeply rooted in all three parties of the incumbent ruling coalition (particularly in the SNS and Smer), it would be naïve to expect a real improvement in conditions for intercultural civic dialogue in Slovakia while these parties remain dominant ruling forces. Their evolution toward more moderate forms of appealing to voters is very unlikely as long as they preserve their status; on the contrary, they may further step up their aggressive rhetoric under certain circumstances (e.g. lingering problems in Slovak-Hungarian relations, potential social and political turmoil caused by world economic crisis or declining voter support). In the long term, only declining voter support for national populists may create favorable conditions for resuming mutual dialogue and cooperation between representatives of different social groups.

In a situation when national populists dominate the country's political scene, the challenging task of maintaining the civic dialogue is on the shoulders of non-populist political forces and civil society actors (i.e. non-governmental organizations, associations and initiatives). Non-populist, democratically-oriented political forces find themselves between the rock and a hard place. Besides serious problems caused first by departure into opposition and later by rivalry between party factions, opposition parties are exposed to strong pressure from protagonists of national populism. While the opposition as a whole has preserved its internal character and resisted the temptation to include overtly populist tools into their voter mobilization arsenal, the mentioned pressure from national populists has taken its toll.

Mutual cooperation between Slovak and ethnic Hungarian leaders of the democratic political elite has been *de facto* suspended for quite some time. Apart from minor exceptions, Slovak opposition parties do not venture to present views that would openly differ from nationalistic tendencies implanted into the public discourse, particularly regarding issues related to mutual Slovak-Hungarian relations. In recent months, national populists' proposals whose practical implementation might seriously reduce the existing standard of minority rights' protection (e.g. government's meddling with national history and geography textbooks for ethnic Hungarian students of secondary schools) did not encounter with open criticism or resistance on the part of opposition parties.

Consequently, the entire minority agenda including issues directly related to the universal principles of liberal democracy is left exclusively up to political representation of ethnic Hungarians, which further strengthens division lines within society, encourages trench ideological warfare in the public discourse and complicates the intercultural civic dialogue. Under the pressure from national populists and apparently due to anxiety of being accused of insufficiently strong 'national' orientation, part of the opposition even endorsed national populists' initiatives in some symbolic areas.

For quite some time, the role of initiators and direct participants of the intercultural dialogue in Slovakia has been substituted by civil society actors, i.e. representatives of non-governmental organizations, independent think tanks, civic initiatives, academic institutions, independent media and publicly active intellectuals. Over the past two years, they limited themselves to reacting to extraordinary events or proposals and disturbing social trends that

undermined the intercultural dialogue. But while reacting is extremely important in terms of provoking social response that immediate affects the situation at hand, it cannot substitute such forms of activity that have preventive effects or reproduce conditions for sustaining the ongoing dialogue. Particularly important in this respect are activities of rather permanent nature (e.g. monitoring, analysis, expert communication, discussion forums, elaboration of concrete practical policy proposals, etc.) that may potentially appeal to political actors and the general public.

The experience of Slovak NGOs in the field of society-wide activities that fundamentally affected the country's development in the past decade may come very useful; however, it requires certain innovations with respect to the new situation whose specific framework is provided by the country's EU membership. Bringing to the European level the public discussion on issues that provide breeding ground for national populism might be a viable innovation.

Oľga Gyárfášová

NATIONAL POPULISM IN SLOVAKIA: POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND VIEWS OF THE PUBLIC

"If they say what we want to hear, they are free to do what we don't want to see".
Tomáš Janovic

INTRODUCTION

Studies discussing the phenomenon of populism traditionally focus on political actors, such as political parties or individual leaders, or the issues used to mobilize the public. Much less attention is paid to analyzing party electorates in particular or the public in general and the link between populist appeals and voter attitudes. In other words, one can read much more about 'political supply' than about 'social demand.' The true extent of the latter is usually revealed *ex post*, when election results of populist or semi-populist parties are announced. This is probably related to the fact that 'convicting' the public of susceptibility to the populist appeal may appear very easy on the first glimpse (after all, many journalists attempt to do it in their articles) while documenting such 'affection' by empirical numbers is much more difficult. In this case, the border between popular and populist is even blurrier than in the case of identifying populist political actors; therefore, we must be much more cautious and should speak rather of the degree of proclivity or openness to such appeals rather than observe their presence or absence. Besides, politicians' appeals and voters' views often interact to create some sort of perpetual bond in which it is often impossible to tell the cause from the consequence and a dependent variable from an independent one.

Bearing in mind these limitations, the present study will focus on the following two aspects of sociological analysis:

1. A more general analysis of attitudes and views of the Slovak population between 2006 and 2008;

2. Socio-demographic and opinion portrait of supporters of the dominant ruling party Smer-SD, which is a classic example of a party that largely defies most of the up-to-date experience with executive performance of populist parties in Slovakia.

1. TRENDS IN PUBLIC OPINION

1.1. Comeback of identity politics

In Slovakia, populist strategies with strong ethnic or nationalist accents did not emerge in the first decade of the 21st century as Slovakia has struggled with political implications of its ethnic heterogeneity since the early 1990s. It was undoubtedly due to this structural cleavage that in terms of forming political division lines and shaping political competition, Slovakia represented the case of weak socio-economic (i.e. left-right) dichotomy, in compliance with a hypothesis formulated in 1976 by Ronald Inglehart and Hans – Dieter Klingemann that the left and the right are insufficiently distinctive particularly in countries that have not yet resolved "issues of national identity" (quoted according to Krause, 2000, p. 27). At the end of the 1990s, Slovakia finally abandoned the formative conflict that was manifested as a fierce

struggle over preserving its political regime's democratic nature. Following the 1998 elections but especially after 2002, principal division lines in Slovakia (and the Czech Republic, for that matter) became socio-economic issues that are the basis for political parties' traditional right-left positioning. This may be documented by a number of empirical studies, for instance a media content analysis (Janči, 2004) or expert surveys (Rohrschneider – Whitefield, 2004).

This trend peaked before the 2006 elections. The most determinant issue of the 2006 election campaign was the future fate of launched reforms; its principal political protagonists were the ruling Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) and the opposition Smer – Social Democracy (Smer-SD). In the ensuing conflict, the former party strove to defend and preserve the reforms launched by the centre-right ruling coalition; the latter party advertised a more socially-oriented state and changes in already launched reforms. Despite the clear social and anti-reform profile of Smer-SD, the linkage between the party's election rhetoric and its electorate's social status and views remained ambiguous. Smer-SD supporters showed rather 'mainstream' characteristics while the main antipode of SDKÚ-DS sympathizers as the most vocal advocates of ongoing reforms were primarily stalwarts of the People's Party –Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS) and the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS).

But the 2006 elections – and particularly what followed – confirmed that Slovakia has a long way to go before its political landscape is divided along the principal right-left continuum. Collective identities based on ethnicity represent a politically relevant cleavage. During the election campaign, the Slovak National Party (SNS) imposed the issue of ethnic Hungarians upon the country's political discourse. A typical single-issue nationalist party, the SNS based its anti-Hungarian campaign on presenting ethnocentric slogans (e.g. *Slovak Government to Slovaks!*) and questioning political loyalty of the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) or the Hungarian ethnic minority as such to the Slovak Republic. This 'ethnic card' has catalyzed mobilization of SNS and SMK electorates and eventually 'brought' the equal number of parliamentary seats to both parties.

"[Smer] as the expected election victor rode the wave of Fico's harsh rhetoric aimed against the incumbent administration in general and against Mikuláš Dzurinda in particular; however, the SMK as the political representative of ethnic Hungarians was not among objects directly targeted by his [verbal] attacks" (Kusý, 2006, p. 214).

Even on the level of public opinion, the issue of ethnic minorities' social status and rights had very clearly defined poles as it polarized particularly SMK and SNS supporters. The closest to the SMK position among Slovak subjects' electorates were SDKÚ-DS sympathizers, followed after a certain gap by SF and KDH supporters, although the distance between the latter and the SMK was significant. On the opposite pole were SNS stalwarts who most frequently emphasized the majority's right to decide at the minority's expense and demanded the crucial status for the Slovaks as the 'statehood nation;' this opinion pole strongly attracted KSS and HZDS sympathizers as well. Smer-SD kept its positions in the mainstream that represented the average Slovak population.

While the issue of ethnic identity was not the dominant issue before the 2006 elections, it resonated substantially more than in 1998 or 2002. Besides, it was strongly accentuated after the elections, this time not only by the SNS but also by Smer-SD. The politics of identity, which expert literature views as opposite to the interest (Cigánik 2001), returned to Slovakia's political and public discourse in the full strength. As Grigorij Mesežnikov points out in his study in the present publication, its principal issues include: understanding the fabric of society, defining the character of the system of government, choosing the concept of nation, the dichotomy of 'ethnic' vs. 'civil,' and general harmony between the political credo and liberal-democratic values, interpretation of national history, perception of particular historical periods, events and figures; relation to ethnic minorities, perception of minority rights' implemen-

tation in the field of native language, culture and education, relation to political representation of the largest ethnic minority (i.e. ethnic Hungarians), and perception of the issue of Slovak-Hungarian historic reconciliation; ethnic Hungarians' relation to Hungary, which they view as their fatherland in terms of culture and language.

A dominant feature of national populism is articulating the populist argument in national terms. As Peter Učeň pointed out "… dominant feature [of former Slovak PM Vladimír Mečiar´s nationalist populism] was the articulation of the populist argument in nationalist terms, frequently interchanging *demos* and *ethnos"* (Učeň, 2004, p. 48).

Let us now shift our attention away from the SNS and the declining ĽS-HZDS to reasons why social-democratic Smer-SD embraced the national agenda. A study elaborated in the environment close to Smer-SD put forth three reasons behind this shift in the party's program profile:

1. "Authentic conviction of the relevant part of the party leadership about the need for a strong national dimension of government policies that, according to these leaders, is in the country's best interests.

2. Pragmatic reasons – if the national agenda was left exclusively up to coalition partners (i.e. SNS) or even to opposition parties (i.e. KDH), these parties might use this agenda to strengthen their positions and nationally-oriented voters might begin to prefer populist parties to standard political subjects.

3. Pure political calculations in order to capitalize on a strong national sentiment in the relevant part of the general public" (Blaha – Žanony, 2008, p. 24).

While the authors themselves admit that the national agenda is not part of "natural or extended social-democratic agenda" (Blaha – Žanony, 2008, p. 23), they argue that the shift might positively contribute to the process of standardizing Slovakia's political scene.

So, the question is whether the Slovak public has the potential to accept and appreciate this kind of politics and rhetoric? As far as complex research findings go, we may only refer to a survey examining collective identities from 2003 whose authors observed: "The strength of national identities rests most probably in potentiality, in the fact that while they may not be overly mobilized at the moment, there may arise a situation when they promptly become mobilized 'against others'…" (Krivý, 2006, p. 100). One might say that national identity is some sort of 'dormant potentiality' that may be mobilized and is actually being mobilized, particularly in the second and third year of the incumbent administration's term in office.

A dominant social-democratic party's unusual emphasis on the national agenda was also reflected in the atypical value content of the left in Slovakia compared to other Visegrad Four (V4) countries (Gyárfášová – Slosiarik 2008). Besides expected highlighting of paternalism and social rights, self-proclaimed leftists in Slovakia essentially more frequently than rightists emphasized the value of nation, which according to traditional axioms is rather part of the rightist agenda. It is plain to see that ethnicity represents a relevant social cleavage in Slovakia, which explains why the SNS is not the only party of the incumbent ruling coalition to embrace national and nationalist issues. The slogan of "Think Nationally, Feel Socially"[90] amalgamates national and leftist dimensions, which is not only reflected in the alliance of self-proclaimed social democrats and nationalists but also represents their own contribution to the national agenda.

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[90] It was the main slogan of incumbent President Ivan Gašparovič's election campaign in 2004. Besides his 'mother party' of HZD, Gašparovič was also supported by Smer-SD, the SNS and several other nationalistic non-parliamentary political subjects. Both ruling parties endorsed Gašparovič's run for re-election in 2009.

1.2. Populism for the good times

The Robert Fico administration came to power at the point when Slovakia was doing extremely well in terms of economic performance. The country's economic growth reached 8.5% in 2006 and even historic 10.7% in 2007. People directly felt such national success through declining unemployment, increasing average wage and purchasing power, and, last but not least, through drawing economic aid from EU structural funds. The objective economic situation was also reflected in people's subjective perception of their socio-economic situation as sociological surveys indicated a general decline in pessimism (Bútorová – Gyárfášová 2007, 2008). The share of people who positively evaluated the overall condition and future prospects of the country's economy as well as their households' standard of living increased; as of the end of 2007, the Slovaks ranked second on the V4 list as they evaluated their country's macroeconomic and microeconomic situation and future prospects less optimistically than Poles but more optimistically than Czech and especially Hungarian citizens.

Graph 1
"For about a year, Slovakia has been ruled by the Robert Fico administration. What do you associate the incumbent administration with? Which of its activities or measures do you remember the most?" (Respondents' spontaneous answers in %)
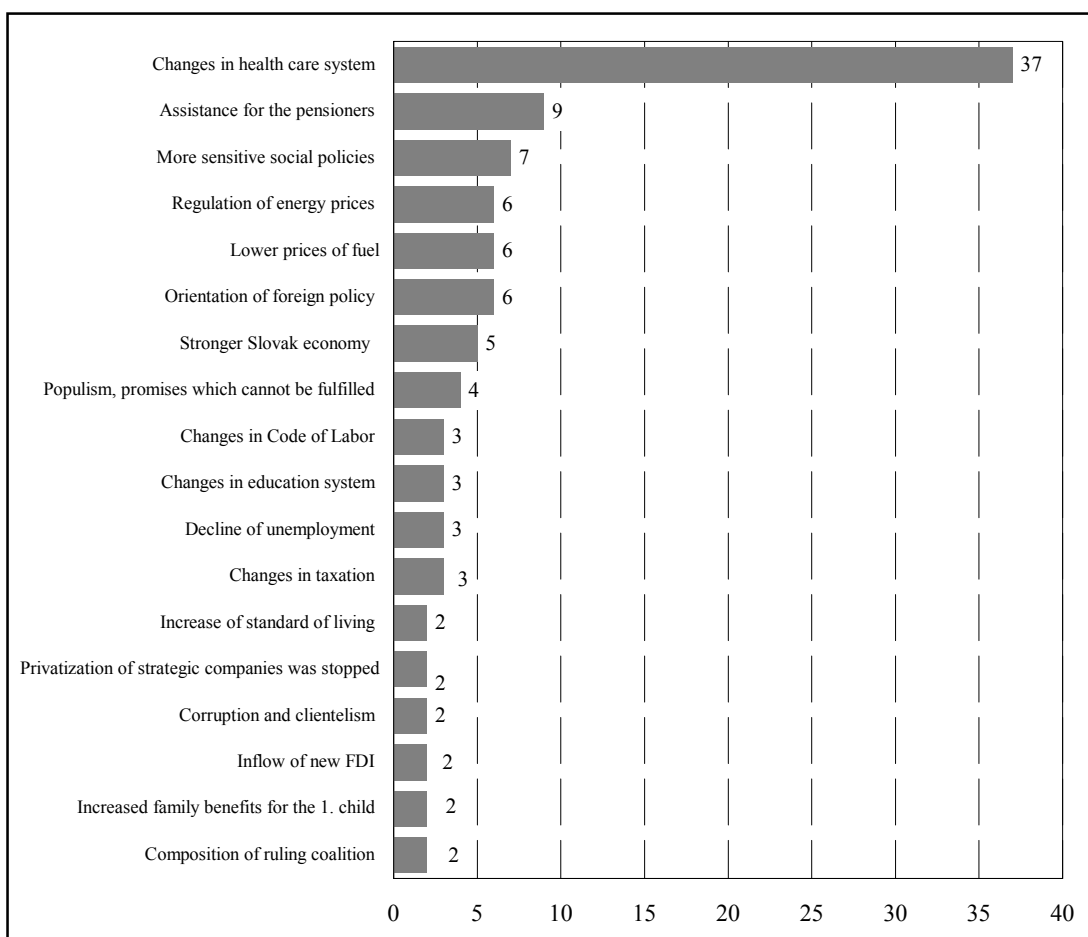
Source: FOCUS for *Hospodárske noviny* daily, May 2007.

For some part of the population, positive evaluation of the country's economic condition was combined with satisfaction over the political change brought by the 2006 elections. The rate of economic frustration and social discontent declined particularly among the poorest social categories such as unemployed, pensioners, unskilled workers, people with lowest education status, etc.

While favorable economic development provided the incumbent administration with comfortable conditions in terms of maintaining its popularity, it did not prevent it from using social demagoguery or pursuing non-systemic 'package-type' of social policy, for instance introducing Christmas allowances for pensioners or abolishing 20-crown fees for visiting a doctor (Bútorová – Gyárfášová, 2008, p. 242). These type of policies are very salient in the view of the general public.

This may be illustrated by the findings of a survey carried out at the end of the incumbent administration's first year in office. Back then, most citizens appreciated it particularly for implemented or announced changes in health service that had or promised to have immediate effects on people's 'pockets,' for instance abolishing doctor's fees, reducing drug prices, or efforts to introduce a single health insurance company (cited by 37% of respondents). Other government measures or intentions attracted lesser attention (please see Graph 1).

Graph 2

"Imagine that somebody in Slovakia would intend to curb political and civil freedoms while somebody else would aim to restrict social security. What would you personally consider less acceptable?"
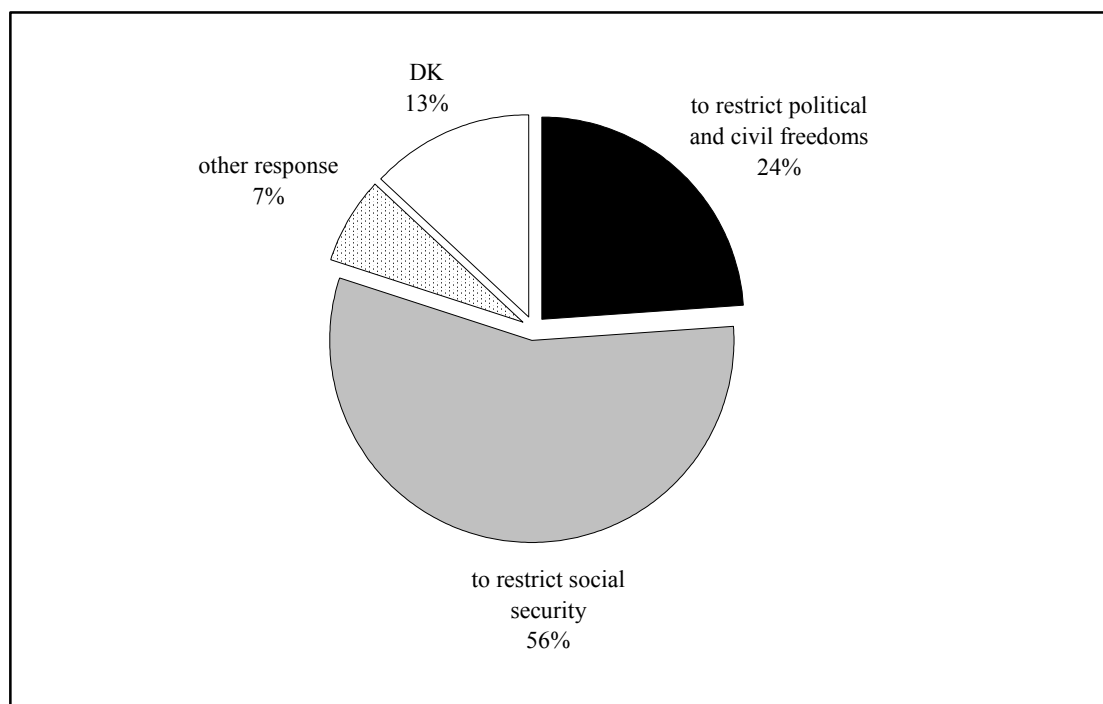
Source: IVO, May 2008.

But populist appeals of social and redistributive nature have other important dimensions as well. Waging a war on 'bad monopolies', entrepreneurs and so on appeals to the egalitarian stereotype and people's desire to distinguish themselves negatively from 'the powers that be' (the rich, businessmen, etc.), which is very popular in Slovakia. "Social definitions are not as powerful in positive connotations as they are in negative ones," observed the already mentioned survey on collective identities (Krivý, 2006, pp. 71 – 74).

Besides, the Slovak society continues to prefer social security over political and civil liberties (please see Graph 2). The Fico administration strongly encourages people's 'sticking' to social security and material values. "A man who lives somewhere in a family house and pays hefty thousands for heating gas doesn't give a damn about what some third-rate OSCE clerk

Mr. Haraszti says," said Robert Fico in reaction to the OSCE's criticism of the prepared Press Act.[91]

Unlike the HZDS populism in the 1990s, the populism we may observe after the 2006 elections is not based primarily on social deprivation.[92] The most recent wave of national populism hit the country in the middle of 'good times'; however, the pace of Slovakia's economic growth began to slow down at the end of 2008 and effects of the global financial crisis are likely to show at full tilt over the next several months. Therefore we may expect modifications in national populists' strategies that will react to complicated economic conditions as well as upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 2010.

1.3. Attitudes toward minorities and 'the others'

The attitudes of the Slovak public to minorities in general – be it ethnic (both 'old' and 'new'), cultural, religious or sexual – have been repeatedly examined and documented in the past (Vašečka, 2001; Bútorová – Gyárfášová, 2007, 2008; Gallová-Kriglerová – Kadlečíková, 2008).

Let us begin with the Bogardus scale, which is the most common indicator measuring the majority's social distance from particular population groups. In an IVO survey carried out in May 2008, respondents manifested the greatest distance from skinheads and neo-Nazis as over four in five of them (82%) are repulsive to the idea of sharing a neighborhood with them (please see Graph 3). They were followed by drug addicts and the Roma who were labeled as undesired neighbors by 69% of respondents; this shows the high rate of the majority's social distance from the Roma as well as the high rate of stereotype, since many respondents who objected to living next to members of this minority also said they are not in contact with them at all. The lingering high rate of social distance from the Roma has been documented by several empirical surveys (IVO 2006; SNSĽP 2006).

Over one in three respondents (34%) expressed distance from gay couples; generally speaking, people's perception of non-heterosexual persons is a specific problem, although perception of gay and lesbian couples differs. A relatively high level of social distance may be observed with respect to immigrants as over one in five (21%) respondents said they would not want them for neighbors. It is plain to see that the Slovak society continues to be reserved to cultural dissimilarity although the reasons for this reserve may range from historic roots (e.g. with respect to the Roma) to completely modern issues (e.g. with respect to immigrants).[93]

The majority's perception of particular population groups and its relation to them also shows in people's views of whether society should help tackling their problems and accommodating their specific needs. Available surveys revealed several lingering negative attitudes to certain population groups and negative prejudices that have little or no foundation in people's direct personal experience, for instance with respect to labor migrants from less developed economies.

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[91] "Haraszti z OBSE je pre Fica treťoradý" ['Fico Called OSCE's Haraszti Third-Rate Clerk'], *Sme* daily, April 8, 2008; available at: http://www.sme.sk/c/3815687/smer-pohrozil-referendom.html
[92] For further details, please see Učeň, 2008.
[93] The data on relation to minorities were gathered during a survey "Civil Society and Participation in Slovakia 2008" that was carried out as part of a project implemented by the Centre of Excellence for research on Citizenship and Participation (COPART). The data were used with consent from the principal research establishment – the Research Department of Social and Biological Communication (KVSBK), Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Graph 3
How would you respond if you got for neighbors? (% of responses, „I would be upset",
„I would be worried")
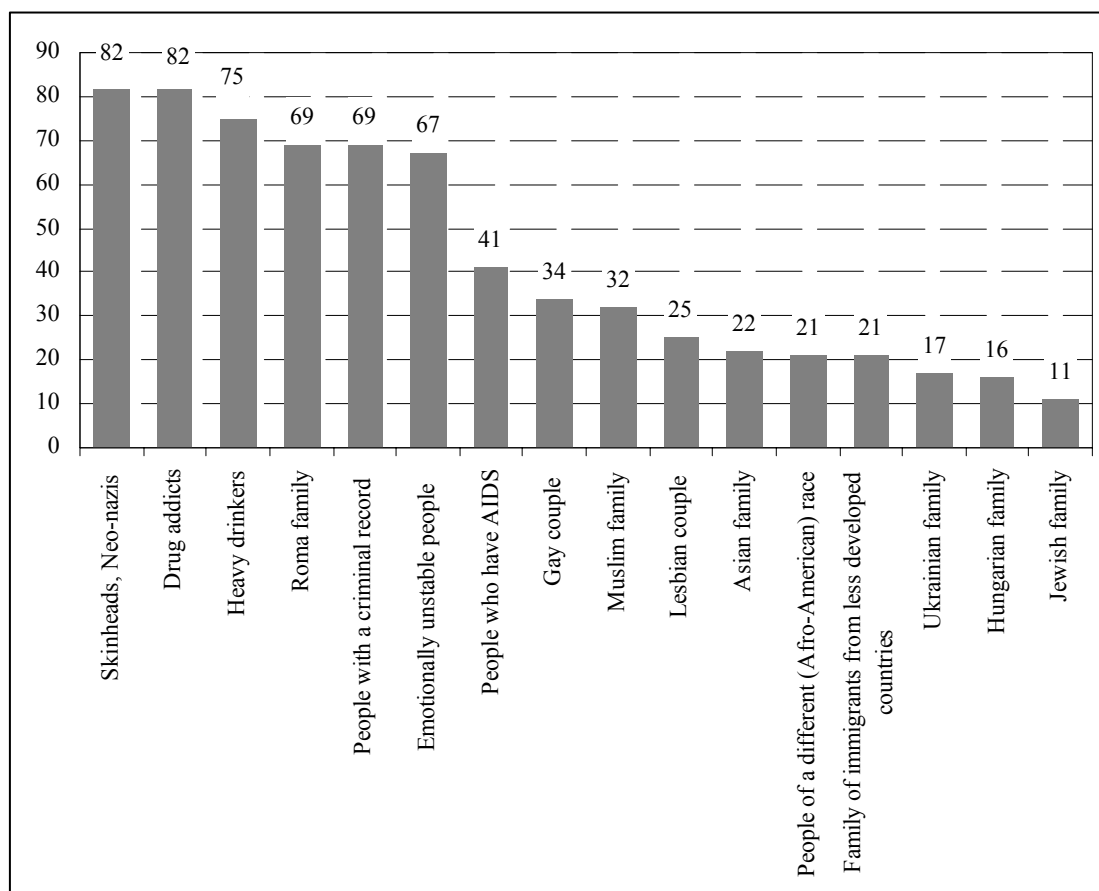
Source: IVO/KVSBK/COPART, May 2008.

Research findings indicate a high degree of sensitivity and empathy with respect to persons with health problems, those who are physically or mentally handicapped, the elderly, or victims of physical violence. A relatively high degree of sensitivity and solidarity also exists with respect to drug addicts and heavy alcoholics. The public opinion is split roughly into two halves regarding the Roma, immigrants from less developed economies and people of different complexion (IVO/KVBSK/COPART, May 2008).[94]

Certain anxiety regarding the inflow of foreigners may be documented by relatively frequent opinions that immigrants "contribute to the growth in crime" (43% of approving vs. 17% of disapproving) and "steal people's jobs" (42% vs. 22%). On the other hand, a minority of Slovak citizens believe that immigrants will "benefit Slovakia's economy" (11% vs. 46%) and represent "an asset for the society because they bring new ideas and culture" (18% vs. 35%) (SNSĽP, 2006). Generally speaking, two in three Slovaks (66%) adopt a negative position on immigrants who come to Slovakia to look for jobs and home ("It will be at the expense of our people and will cause coexistence problems") while two in seven (28%) believe that they "will benefit our economy and enrich our culture" (IVO, April 2006).

These views also correspond to people's preference of Slovakia's non-aspiring and passive role in international politics. Over one in two respondents (51%) endorsed the following assertion: "Slovakia is a small country whose foreign policy should not be anybody's cat's paw

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[94] Population groups that according to respondents do not deserve society's helping hand included bisexuals (71%), gays (69%) and lesbians (68%) (IVO/ KVSBK/COPART, May 2008).

but should mind primarily the country's own interests;" on the other hand, over two in five respondents (41%) agreed with the following assertion: "Although Slovakia is a small country, its foreign policy may have an impact if it does not only mind the country's own interests but support strengthening of democracy and security in the world" (IVO, November 2008).

1.4. Views regarding mutual Slovak-Hungarian relations

From a broad spectrum of potential angles and optics of examining the complex issue of interethnic relations, the following section will focus on a rather narrow angle of people's perception of Slovak-Hungarian relations and the Slovaks' relation to ethnic Hungarians, as these aspects are crucial from the viewpoint of examining the phenomenon of national populism. As Grigorij Mesežnikov points out in his study in the present publication, all three ruling parties' attitudes to the issue show important common elements despite some perceptible differences. Most importantly, it is their confrontational perception of Slovak-Hungarian interethnic relations in their entire historical perspective, demonstrative vigilance with respect to Hungarians, camouflaged or overt preference of the model of excluding ethnic Hungarians on the level of adopting political decisions about the country.

How have the growing tensions in Slovak-Hungarian relations affected the public opinion? At the end of 2006, we observed that forming the ruling coalition of Smer-SD – SNS – ĽS-HZDS radically redefined the 'problem situation' of ethnic Hungarians, encouraged their anxiety and increased their vulnerability. This trend deepened in 2007 and 2008, causing an essential change in ethnic Hungarians' views regarding the overall direction in which our society is heading; their confidence in supreme constitutional authorities declined and they are growing uneasy about increased tensions in mutual Slovak-Hungarian relations, excessive influence of Ján Slota over government policies and discrepancies in investigating the case of Hedviga Malinová (Bútorová – Gyárfášová, 2007, 2008). Consequently, ethnic Hungarians negatively perceive the state of affairs in the field of human rights implementation and they have become much more critical of social developments since 2006.[95]

Table 1
"To what degree do you agree with the following statements?"

	Completely + rather agree		Completely + rather disagree	
	Slovaks	**Hungarians**	**Slovaks**	**Hungarians**
Ethnic Hungarians feel superior to Slovaks.	73	10	17	85
Slovaks feel superior to ethnic Hungarians.	19	58	72	37
Hungarian fellow citizens are equally concerned about Slovakia's prosperity as the Slovaks.	24	88	59	7

Note: The remainder of the 100% comprises the "don't know" responses.
Source: Institute for Public Affairs, November 2008.

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[95] According to a survey carried out by the SNSĽP, almost two in five respondents of Slovak nationality but less than one in four respondents of Hungarian origin viewed the situation in the field of human rights implementation positively. On the other hand, 28% of ethnic Hungarian and 12% of Slovak respondents described it as bad. Two years ago, one in four ethnic Hungarians considered the situation bad ("Maďari vnímajú dodržiavanie práv horšie ako Slováci" ['Hungarians Perceive Implementation of Rights More Negatively than Slovaks'], *Sme* daily, December 12, 2008).

At the end of 2008, we are compelled to establish that views of the Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians regarding various aspects of mutual relations and mutual perception are divided by a deep abyss.

Slovaks believe that ethnic Hungarians feel superior to them and are not sufficiently loyal to Slovakia. Ethnic Hungarians, for their part, seem to have no doubts about their loyalty as a vast majority of them endorsed the following assertion: "Hungarian fellow citizens are equally concerned about Slovakia's prosperity as the Slovaks". Besides, the hetero-stereotype about superiority is reciprocal as almost three in five (58%) ethnic Hungarians are convinced that the Slovaks feel superior to them.

Table 2
"Which of the following two statement do you agree more?"

	Agreement with A		Neither – nor		Agreement with B	
	Slovaks	**Hungarians**	**Slovaks**	**Hungarians**	**Slovaks**	**Hungarians**
A: Most Hungarians in Slovakia refuse the idea of changing borders and annexing Slovakia's southern territories to Hungary. **B:** The hidden goal of most Hungarians in Slovakia changing borders and annexing Slovakia's southern territories to Hungary.	30	79	21	13	36	6
A: Representatives of ethnic Hungarians are not happy with the existing standard of minority rights and escalate their demands. **B:** Representatives of ethnic Hungarians merely strive to preserve the existing standard of minority rights.	67	21	14	19	10	56
A: Slovak Government ought to be more accommodating with respect to ethnic Hungarians' demands. **B:** Slovak Government ought to be more vigorous in defending interests of the majority Slovak nation.	9	72	20	18	64	7

Note: The remainder of the 100% comprises the "don't know" responses.
Source: Institute for Public Affairs, November 2008.

Diametrically different were also respondents' views on other assertions on mutual Slovak-Hungarian relations. Most Slovak respondents agreed with the opinion that "representatives of ethnic Hungarians are not happy with the existing standard of minority rights and escalate their demands"; at the same time, they believed that "Slovak Government ought to be more vigorous in defending interests of the majority Slovak nation". Most ethnic Hungarian respondents opposed both assertions. Respondents' views were less polarized only about the assertion "hidden goal of most Hungarians in Slovakia changing borders and annexing Slovakia's southern territories to Hungary" that was endorsed by only one in three Slovak respondents. Suspicions about ethnic Hungarians' irredentist ambitions are the most frequent among SNS supporters (49%).

The political discourse on Slovak-Hungarian relations often becomes the platform for political parties' mutual accusations of inciting tensions. Even here, the views of Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians are fundamentally different. While the Slovaks attribute responsibility primarily to the Hungarian Government, Hungary's official representatives and other representatives of Hungary's political and public life, ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia blame particularly the SNS but also individual cabinet members including Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Table 3
"Mutual Slovak-Hungarian relations grew more complicated recently. People's views differ over the reasons behind this development. Please, rate the following subjects' responsibility for escalating Slovak-Hungarian tensions on the scale ranging from 5 (key responsibility) to 0 (no responsibility)." (Share of responses 5 + 4 in %)

	Slovaks	**Hungarians**
Hungarian Government and Hungary's official representatives	70	37
Other representatives of Hungary's political and public life	70	36
SNS leaders	48	84
Other members of the Slovak cabinet	25	62
Prime Minister Robert Fico	16	61

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, November 2008.

These findings clearly show that at least on the level of opinions there is a significant tension between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority. The image of enemy has emerged within both environments and each side attributes responsibility for the existing situation to the opposite side. In some cases, the opinion polarization attains the form of irreconcilable, extremely different positions that threaten to cross 'the point of no return'. Unfortunately, we have no way of comparing these findings in time perspective since no surveys featuring identical questions were carried out in previous years; however, the degree of polarization reminds one of the situation from mid-1990s.

1.5. Decline in social capital and participation

In order to draw a complete picture of Slovakia's social and political climate, let us fill in a handful of findings from the most recent *European Values Study* (EVS).[96] From the viewpoint of the principal issue of our interest it is important that social trust (i.e. social capital or interpersonal trust) declined from 22% in 2004 to 12% in 2008. In other words, only one in eight respondents agreed with the assertion that "generally speaking, most people can be trusted"; on the other hand, five in six respondents (84%) believed that "one ought to be very cautious in contact with others" while four years ago their share was only 22% (EVS, 2004, 2008).

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[96] The coordination establishment in Slovakia is the Sociological Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences; complete data are available at www.sasd.konzum.sk.

This trend is related to another negative phenomenon, i.e. a decline in the rate of people's civic participation and interest in public affairs. A press release featuring basic findings of the EVS study from 2008 observed that, compared to the 1990s, there is "increasing privatization of individual life, reluctance to take part in tackling society's problems and a shift from the public domain into the safety of relatives and friends, away from committed life and toward individual strategies of tackling life problems" (EVS 2008).

After all, declining civic participation may best be illustrated by a drop in voter participation. Since the 2006 elections, there have been several mass civic initiatives that reacted to negative political phenomena on the national level (e.g. non-governmental organizations' resistance against the cabinet's proposal to abolish the 2% income tax assignation mechanism or amend the law on civic associations and environmental activists' protests in the High Tatras) or the local one (e.g. a campaign against plans to build a waste dump in Pezinok or to preserve the PKO in Bratislava); however, civic participation remains largely limited to narrow circles of concerned citizens. The feeling of civic helplessness or resignation creates best conditions for the populist appeal.

Generally speaking, citizens do not seem to perceive problems of democracy and politics or even corruption and clientelism as a priority; for instance, surveys examining the most pressing social problems did not show any increase in their urgency between 2006 and 2007 (Bútorová – Gyárfášová, 2008). The very fact that several scandals involving representatives of the incumbent ruling coalition have had virtually no impact on popularity of ruling parties or their leaders indicates that unfairness, corruption and clientelism are perceived as an immanent quality of politics and that corrupt behavior of politicians, regardless of their party affiliation, is viewed natural. In other words, non-corrupt behavior is not a prerequisite to voter confidence or favor. Relativization of propriety allows populist leaders to use the effective dichotomy of 'us' vs. 'them' and get away with defining 'us' simply by highlighting corruption of 'the others'.

2. MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SMER-SD SUPPORTERS

The case of the dominant ruling party Smer-SD is particularly interesting because this party represents a remarkable example that in many respects goes beyond the scope of past experience with populist political parties' performance in the executive. Development of the party's voting preferences since the 2006 elections contradicts the phenomenon of ruling parties' mid-term unpopularity, which ensues from the fact that most administrations pursue less popular policies in the first half of their tenure and adopt more popular measures in the second half in order to drum up voter support.[97] Generally speaking, the story of Smer-SD is inconsistent with a typical trajectory of populist parties' popularity once they become part of government. Some analysts speak of populist parties' "high mortality" due to their government participation (Deegan-Krause – Haughton, 2008, p. 3). But voter support for Smer-SD has not declined since it formed the incumbent administration in 2006; on the contrary, it has increased. So, in what respects does Smer-SD and its electorate correspond to more general patterns and in what respects does it represent a deviation that defies the theory?

2.1. Accentuating social problems despite not being economic 'losers'

According to the literature (e.g. Lang, 2005), populist parties appeal particularly to disenchanted and frustrated voters. Research findings show that in terms of views and profile, most

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[97] After the incumbent ruling coalition of Smer-SD – SNS – ĽS-HZDS was formed, voting preferences of Smer-SD in public opinion polls got stabilized and constantly increased. Ever since its election triumph in June 2006 when the party received 29.1% of the popular vote, its voting preferences have fluctuated between 40 and 45% of decided voters.

supporters of Smer-SD are not typical 'losers' of the transformation process after 1989. This profile has been and continues to be typical for KSS and ĽS-HZDS voters. Smer-SD, for its part, is the most popular party in all basic demographic categories except people with university education who prefer the SDKÚ-DS and ethnic Hungarians who favor the SMK. Also, Smer-SD is the most popular party among people from the highest income categories. On the other hand, several demographic categories are dominated by potential non-voters (e.g. people between 25 and 34, people with primary education, people from the lowest income categories) or undecided voters (e.g. the youngest voters) (Empirické dáta, FOCUS 2007).

Partly due to the party's high popularity, the electorate of Smer-SD falls within the 'socio-demographic mainstream', which was corroborated by testing of voters from 47 different socio-demographic environments in 2007. Only in 14 of them, supporters of Smer-SD posted a statistically relevant difference from the national average; half of these environments are defined geographically as the party can rely on above-average voter support in Trenčín and Prešov regions, partly also in Banská Bystrica and Žilina regions while its support is below-average in Bratislava, Trnava and Nitra regions. The principal factor in the latter two regions is their ethnic make-up; the Bratislava region, for its part, illustrates a relatively weak position of Smer-SD sympathizers in the big city environment.

Unlike any other parliamentary party, Smer-SD does not rely on a strong 'demographic pillar', mostly due to its broad mainstream character, which is also the main reason why its further expansion is not hindered by any obstacles.

Table 4
List of the most pressing social problems

Problems	Supporters of Smer-SD	Slovak population
Unemployment	**31.7**	25.6
Quality of health care	29.2	28.5
Poverty	**25.0**	22.9
Criminality, organized crime	22.0	**24.3**
Prevalence of corruption and bribery	19.2	20.4
Living standard of people like yourself	**19.1**	16.5
Economic and social disparities between regions	15.7	15.3
Abuse of power	13.7	**15.8**
Pension security system	12.1	13.3
Condition of the judiciary, law enforceability, meting out justice	11.4	11.2
Status and opportunities of young people	10.5	12.0

Note:

1. Using a 10-degree scale, respondents first rated seriousness/urgency of 30 problems from a presented list; then they were asked to identify three most pressing problems. The table features all problems identified by more than 10% of respondents.

2. Graphically highlighted are significant deviations of Smer-SD supporters from Slovakia's entire population.

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, May 2008.

On the other hand, the accent on social problems does affect priorities of Smer-SD supporters (please see Table 4). While their perception of most pressing social problems does not differ from that of the entire population, it does relatively consistently show above-average emphasis of Smer-SD supporters on problems related to social status and living standard. Compared to the entire population, they more frequently cited problems of unemployment, poverty and standard of living. On the other hand, they are slightly less sensitive to issues such as crime or power abuse.

2.2. Opinion profile

We have been unable to examine value orientations of political parties' supporters in as great a detail as before the 2006 elections; however, even sparser empirical data clearly highlight certain specifics.

Table 5
Views of political parties' supporters (on a scale of -100 to +100)[98]

Supporters	Scale		
	Paternalism	Respecting minority rights	Understanding for the Roma's situation
SDKÚ-DS	- 29.9	34.8	-68.4
SNS	- 4.7	8.7	-71.3
Smer-SD	**0.4**	**31.5**	**-61.2**
SMK	2.3	75.2	-56.7
KDH	10.6	33.8	-60.7
ĽS-HZDS	11.4	26.2	-60.4
KSS	11.5	21.1	- 86.9
Entire sample	-0.9	36.9	- 64.1
Compass	41.4	66.5	25.8

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, May 2008.

On the three examined scales of paternalism, respecting minority rights and understanding for the Roma's situation, the ranking of Smer-SD supporters was similar as in April 2006, i.e. fluctuating around average values for the entire population. On the continuum of paternalism, the extreme poles were occupied by SDKÚ-DS vs. KSS supporters; on the minority rights continuum it was SMK vs. SNS sympathizers; finally, on the continuum of understanding for the Roma (which differentiates the Slovak society similarly imperceptibly as relation to environmental protection) it was SMK vs. KSS stalwarts.

A similar distribution of opinions on minority issues was recorded in November 2008.

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[98] Indicator about paternalism: "State should protect its citizens as much as possible and solve most of their problems for them" vs. "State should lead its citizens to greatest possible independence and responsibility for themselves and minimize interventions with their lives."
Indicator about respecting minority rights: "In democracy, rights of minorities must be respected consistently" vs. "In democracy, the majority has the right to adopt decisions even at the expense of minorities."
Indicator about understanding for the Roma's situation: "Most Roma in Slovakia live in poor conditions because they do not have equal opportunities to tackle their situation" vs. "Most Roma in Slovakia live in poor conditions because they refuse to adapt to rules of the society."

Table 6
"Which of the following assertions would you subscribe to?"

A: Representatives of ethnic Hungarians are not happy with the existing standard of minority rights and escalate their demands.

B: Representatives of ethnic Hungarians merely strive to preserve the existing standard of minority rights.

	Agreement with A	**Neither – nor**	**Agreement with B**
SNS	86	8	5
ĽS-HZDS	78	8	8
Smer-SD	76	11	9
KDH	68	12	10
Slovakia total	63	14	15
SDKÚ-DS	60	19	16
Undecided	54	18	12
Non-voters	54	17	15
SMK	15	15	68

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, November 2008.

2.3. Leader personifying his party

A typical feature of Smer-SD (but also two other ruling parties) is that its voters' sympathies are largely concentrated on the party leader. Smer-SD Chairman Robert Fico is trusted by almost 90% of party supporters, which is popularity any other Smer-SD leader can only dream of. Number two is Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák with a rating of 25%, followed by President Ivan Gašparovič, originally from the HZD.

Besides, popularity of Robert Fico is not only fuelled by Smer-SD supporters as he is also very popular in other voter environments, particularly sympathizers of both remaining ruling parties who view him as the second most trustworthy politician.

Table 7
Trustworthy politicians in the eyes of parliamentary political parties' supporters (%)

Smer-SD supporters		**SNS supporters**		**ĽS-HZDS supporters**	
Robert Fico	89	Ján Slota	83	Vladimír Mečiar	88
Robert Kaliňák	25	Robert Fico	27	Robert Fico	24
Ivan Gašparovič	21	Anna Belousovová	16	Ján Slota	22
SDKÚ-DS supporters		**SMK supporters**		**KDH supporters**	
Mikuláš Dzurinda	43	Béla Bugár	52	Pavol Hrušovský	44
Iveta Radičová	33	Pál Csáky	30	Daniel Lipšic	21
Ivan Mikloš	25	Edit Bauer	9	Vladimír Palko	15

Note: Respondents were asked to identify three political leaders spontaneously, which is why the sum of percentages for particular electorates may exceed 100%.
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, December 2007.

The common feature of all opposition parties' electorates is that each of them ranked their own party leaders as three most trustworthy politicians; it is fair to draw a conclusion that in this case, voters' preference of their party is based on a broader supply of political leaders, however they miss a strong leadership.

A number of political analysts point out that leader's personality is the key factor affecting party's performance and success. The genesis of Smer-SD illustrates that popularity of its leader while a member of the Party of Democratic Left (SDĽ) predetermined subsequent success of a party founded by him. The dominant position of Robert Fico as the party leader is obvious throughout its existence. In the 2006 elections, Fico received 443,230 preferential votes (66% of the total number of valid ballots cast for Smer-SD), which was substantially more than 299,253 preferential votes received by Robert Kaliňák. Immediately after elections, Fico was thus perceived as the "main factor behind the party's election success" (Orogváni, 2006, p. 107). His public appearance in the position of prime minister and party chairman at the same time strengthens the charismatic link between him and his party and creates a similar phenomenon as was once represented by the HZDS and its chairman Vladimír Mečiar.

Smer-SD Chairman and Prime Minister Robert Fico also shows other hallmarks of a populist leader, most importantly direct and unmediated communication with the public and constant campaigning against 'enemies'. It is therefore symptomatic that Smer-SD supporters appreciate the cabinet not only for social policy measures but also for "campaign against monopolies" (IVO, November 2008). One of the main factors behind the party's continuous success is that despite being a ruling party, Smer-SD and particularly its leader preserve the ability to advertise a strong anti-establishment stance aimed against monopolies, the media and political opponents. Rhetorically, building the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' also serves to develop another feature appreciated by voters – 'taking care' of citizens.

3. CONCLUSION

The sociological study on national populism sums up views and attitudes of people in Slovakia after the 2006 elections and offers a profile of the strongest ruling party's electorate. Having examined the public opinion from various aspects relevant to national populism, the authors are unable to draw a watertight conclusion that the Slovaks are more susceptible to populism than people from other countries or that Slovakia has 'a disposable populist electorate'. Views and political preferences of people in Slovakia are affected by the nature of structural cleavage (e.g. the country's ethnic heterogeneity) as well as historic and cultural legacies, the current configuration of the political landscape and other factors.

In Slovakia as well as other central and eastern European countries that recently joined the European Union, the recent success of populist appeals is also related to certain exhaustion of the liberal political elite whose leadership and mobilization potential was weakened during the challenging transformation and integration process. Particularly in Slovakia, this wave of populism came in the middle of economic boom and in the time of subjectively perceived economic improvement. In other words, the success of Slovak populists proves that even prosperity and voters' satisfaction do not guarantee immunity against populist appeals.

National populism mobilizes collective identities and encourages people to distinguish themselves from 'others' based on ethnic or cultural dissimilarity, which defies the civic principle and does not support intercultural dialogue. Populist methods of appealing to voters are used by all three parties of the incumbent ruling coalition. Still, it is possible to undermine their effectiveness, not only by criticizing and explaining their motivation and risks they represent but also by offering a viable non-populist alternative.

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