*Peter Zilka**

*Graduate Student of Security Studies, Institute of Political Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University Prague*

FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: A SLOVAK CASE STUDY

Abstract

History often deemed as an ongoing spiral, can easily repeat itself and present a new security challenge. Inasmuch as people are driven by fear and grievances during uneasy times, it can often open doors to populism and demagogy as tools for power seeking groups – an unfortunate reality from the last century. Such political strategies have nowadays taken new shapes in the age of social medias, and due to the series of ongoing crises the European Union is facing, it can have far reaching consequences if it follows the current tendencies present in its member states. The aim of this paper is to observe on a case study of Slovakia, how such far-right tendencies can achieve a representative breaking point from marginal extremist groups into the mainstream political discourse. Accordingly, an ontological approach is adopted in order to assess how either a refugee crisis, a pandemic or a war at the border represents influential factors under which fear and grievances are shaped by the local political elites during the last two decades. Key findings have demonstrated how such tendencies can open doors for inexpertise, leaving the population in doubt under a discourse that contest every major topic, jeopardizing professional opinion, undermining the authority of state institutions, and on overall creating dangerous polarisation and ideological division within the society.

Keywords: Far-right, Extremism, Populism, European Union, Slovakia

---

*   Contact: 90924780@fsv.cuni.cz

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, the resilience of the European Union and of its member states is constantly put in front of new crises and consequent challenges. Among those, the rise of far-right extremism is showing itself not as a country specific phenomenon, but to a certain extent affecting every member state. However, some countries domestic political scenes are demonstrating worrisome political heading, where the possible implications could present far reaching consequences also for the EU´s decision making process. Such example of turbulent domestic realities particularly demonstrates the case of Slovakia, a country that was for years governed under corruption structures, rotting judicial, police as well as intelligence institutions and processes. After years came an anti-corruption government whose ambitious project has been however thwarted by the COVID-19 as well as Ukrainian crisis, while far-right narratives deepened polarization within the society and attacked liberal values as well as democratic principles. This paper will seek to outline a historic time axis of far-right extremism and the consequent breaking point where such narratives broke into mainstream discourse. For this purpose, the conceptual lens of ontological (in)security will be applied in order to explain how civilian anxiety gave space for such alternative movements.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Regarding the arising implications within a surge of far-right extremism in Europe, a major concern of security studies is drawing attention to possible effect on new far-right terrorist groups. Correspondingly, scholars are calling into question some past assumptions of the seminal work of David C. Rapoport on the Four Waves of Modern Terrorism. Here, the author listed such waves as follows: 1. Anarchist Wave (1880s-1920s), 2. Anti-colonial Wave (1920s-1960s), 3. New left Wave (1960s-1990s), and the last, current 4. Religious wave (1979-). Each with unique characteristics, dominant motivations and specific leading groups, with an approximate duration of forty years (Rapoport 2002). As the current world events are demonstrating a decline of the leading radical Islamic groups such as Daesh or the remnant fractions of al-Qaeda, scholars are questioning a possible new fifth wave of right-wing terror. According to Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank, the possible end to the fourth wave could follow the same patterns of its predecessors: "*a normal distribution, a distribution of terrorist attacks that slope upward,*

reach a peak, and then descend to a minimum level" (Weinberg and Eubank 2010, 599). Hence, as Vincent Auger emphasise, since 2010, there has been a significant increase of such motivated incidents, while they have not expressed themselves to be as deadly as jihadist attacks, the number of conducted attacks in the United States as well as in Europe nevertheless remains higher. What according to him remains important is to evaluate whether it is not just a "transient phenomenon" caused by local political dynamics, and thus a continuation of the fourth religious wave (Auger 2020, 87-93).

Among the scholars researching on the multiple crises that the EU has faced during the last decade and the consequent rise of populism in the EU as well as other security related issues, a concept of ontological security has gained significantly on popularity. According to Catarina Kinnvall et al., "*the greatest security challenge facing people across Europe is not physical, despite the threats of Putin and ISIS, but a sense of fear and anxiety that seems to permeate everyday lives of many European citizens and denizens*" (Kinnvall et al. 2018, 249). Therefore, Ontological security represents studying how a human being perceives and consequently cope with anxieties, danger perceptions vis-à-vis his own identity and autonomy, by looking for routines, spaces or autobiographical narratives that could reassure him (Agius et al. 2020, 436). Such feeling of ontological insecurity can be brought by traumatic events, either directly or non-directly experienced, such as under terrorist attacks, violent crimes or physical traumas (Kaunert et al. 2020, 44) . To understand how such narratives can create debates or be misused by political groups that are misinterpreting certain international events or crises as a threat to the state identity, disrupting the previously established routines and presenting itself as actors that could rehabilitate it (Potočárová 2018). Correspondingly, focusing on dynamics of "belonging" where Europeans are questioning who they are and where do they belong, and "othering" where specific groups such as migrants or minorities are antagonistically portrayed (Kaunert et al. 2020, 42).

EARLIER DEVELOPMENT

It is beyond doubt that the period following the events of November 1989 where Slovakia had the opportunity to find its first steps of freedom wasn't so bright as people expected, and represented years of harsh reality for many. The period of the 1990s, during which Slovakia became independent by peacefully separating itself from the Czechoslovak republic in 1993, was a rocky road to establish itself as

a democracy. A turbulent period marked by political and intelligence games, large scale economic fraud but also a dominance of various mafia groups and many more shady activities – a reality that affect many young independent countries. Such facts in essence jeopardized the country´s international establishment and membership in many organizations such as the case of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Consequently, becoming independent and determining an own identity, would not only mean a rise of nationalism, but also of extremist tendencies. As in many countries in Europe, Slovakia also experienced, primarily among the youth, its own period of skinhead subcultures. As Pavol Struhár argues, such presence has increased in particular after the year 1995 in every major city, due to the spreading influence of international neo-Nazi groups such as *Hamerskins*, *Combat 18* or *Blood and Honour*. Their activities, not being different from those of other international peer groups, consisted of meetings, music production or internet activities. A rising existence manifested itself by aggressive activities that primarily targeted ethnic minorities, generally the Roma communities. Due to such major crime-related issues disturbing the public order, up to 2001 national security forces had to conduct series of raids in order to gradually diminish their presence – nowadays such groups and their sympathizers have redirected their activities into either football hooligan clubs or civil society groups (Struhár 2016, 10-11).

During the first decade of this century, extremist tendencies among the population once again represented an attitude shared only by specific identity groups rather than an observable notion among a significant share of the population. If we look at the given political reality back then, Slovakia had elected a pro-democratic government that established various significant socio-economic reforms that consequently guaranteed a membership in the EU as well as the NATO alliance. Thus, a positive period that would not generate negative feelings and consequently provoke grievances inside the population or give them reasons to look for alternative movements. As a matter of fact, a significant category of active groups were the so-called "nationalists", i.e. groups with a strong nationalist voice. The main ideological belief of these groups focused on the continuation of the legacy established by the first Slovak republic, a historical formation that collaborated with the German Reich. Their discourse marked by the glorification of their leaders such as the then president Jozef Tiso, minister of interior Alexander Mach a leader of the Hlinka Guard militia – symbols of the Holocaust in Slovakia (Struhár 2016, p. 10). One of the most controversial groups within this line was the civil society group "*Slovak Togetherness*" (Slovenská Pospolitosť), renowned

for their marching activities dressed in historical guardsman uniforms, similar to those of the Hlinka Guard. Firstly established as a political party in 2005 and within a year dissolved for being anticonstitutional, their renowned leader Marián Kotleba has nevertheless continued in his political career under a new, own, more "moderate" political party, the "*Kotleba-People's Party Our Slovakia*" (Kotleba-Ľudová strana naše Slovensko - LSNS) (Mikušovič 2007).

LASTING SCARS OF THE FINANCIAL AND MIGRANT CRISIS

As previously mentioned regarding ontological insecurity, dissatisfaction, fear, grudges and anxiety caused by globalization, social and economic changes have apparent influence on far-right extremism. The aftermaths of the Financial crises of 2008, also expressed via an opinion poll conducted in February 2009, showed that half of the population manifested large concerns for negative impacts on their lives, while another third of the population had moderate concerns. Only 13% of the respondents expressed no concerns (SME 2009). Yet, the far-right scene under Marián Kotleba´s LSNS was not able to mobilize an electorate for the parliamentary elections in 2010 with only 1,33% and in 2012 with only 1,58% of the total amount of votes. One explanation behind this can be found in their political campaign where their main themes were rather focusing on problems related to Roma communities, labelled as "parasites", and how to prevent them from taking advantages from the state while they terrorise other polite citizens – thus a willingness to create a home defence militia. On the other hand, the traditional long time established Slovak National Party (Slovenská Národná Strana - SNS), with 5,07% obtained votes in the 2010 elections and 4,55% of the votes in 2012. Its program adhered to their traditional discourse oriented on the "southern threat" – how our Hungarian neighbour could threaten once again our sovereignty and territorial integrity. Both of these parties were emphasizing that there was a need for a strong national state in order to overcome the economic challenges, while none of them argued how to do it rationally (Kluknavská 2012, 12).

The aftermath of the migrant crises from 2015 expressed also itself in arising crisis of political parties, the trust towards the democratic system and of its principles. As the Slovak parliamentary elections were scheduled for March 2016, the issue of migration became the core topic of political campaigns, of the pre-election discourse, and opened doors for polarization. As Ľubomír Zvada argues under a security dilemma lens,

either the stable high profile political parties such as Direction-SD (Smer-SD), SNS or outsider parties such as LSNS and We Are Family-Boris Kollár (Sme Rodina–Boris Kollár), have decided to ride on the wave of Islmophobia and hatred , presenting the refugee crisis as an existential threat for Slovakia and its identity, consequently spreading moral panic (Zvada 2018, 226-231). Not only have traditional political parties been defeated, showing a considerable level of an unstable voters behaviour (Gyárfášová and Slosiarik, 2016), but also a normative rupture between the east and the west. As Aliaksei Kazharski draws out, such rupture or gap is not mainly a consequence of the far-right discourse, but a result of mainstream political parties co-opting with such rhetoric into their own political agenda and making the anti-liberal as well as anti-European discourse normalised (Kazharski 2018, 774).

Due to such discourse gaining momentum and being employed from each side, the citizen's anxieties have demonstrated themselves in public as well as on the internet. It is certainly not a unique phenomenon as people all over the EU have exhibited their Islamophobic emotions by protesting on the streets against migrant quotas, or with unfortunate events of Muslim minorities being directly confronted with violence. Yet, as people feared the multiple and recurrent terrorist attacks, an important fact is that Slovakia has not experienced any terrorist attack on its territory, had not to deal with the foreign fighters phenomenon or its youth being en-masse radicalized. Meanwhile the refugee distribution quotas set by the EU institutions were moderate and Slovakia itself represented only a transition hub for them. Despite such facts, Slovakia has been witnessing a large-scale propaganda on the internet where hate speech was also spread by politicians not taking responsibility for their disinformation (Walter 2019). Muslim minorities, while consisting only of 0.2 percent of the Slovak population, were deemed according to opinion polls, as unwanted for as much as 68% of the respondents, stating that they would not want them as a neighbour. Not to mention the multiple anti-Islamization protests organised by the political party LSNS, where one of their most famous mobilised 14 thousand citizens (Hafez 2018, 439-442). As an illustration of the changing tendencies where members of the LSNS group were seen firstly as outsiders, have now members in the parliament whose attitude can be demonstrated by dubious violent incidents, such as the example of a verbal assaults on a Muslim family in Bratislava (Dugovič 2016). Showing an alteration in political culture, where state representatives are being chosen for being able to propose an alternative truth and not their added value in terms of expertise.

RECENT DEVELOPMENT

Such political changes, disparities and doubtfulness of the voters and their ontological insecurity, has been considerably deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and people fearing unemployment and social isolation. The consequences of this crisis have expressed themselves as an interconnected relation of polarisation and consequent medical difficulties. Such disorder has been in large part been caused by the spread of disinformation and a wrangled-up government that wasn't able to unite the country with a constant reassuring political discourse. Thus, creating space for the opposition and far-right political scene to doubt every decision, causing not only a low vaccination rate, but also an effect where citizens do not trust the public experts. An effect where either doctors or scientist competency is being disregarded, by going against their recommendations and regulations because "people's freedom is being violated". Despite critical numbers of hospitalized patients, people have been encouraged to participate in demonstrations in the streets of Bratislava as well as in front of houses of the members of the government´s pandemic committee (Osvaldová et al. 2021; Lendel 2021). The situation went as far as inciting own followers to raid grocery stores under the anti-mask protests. Here, such action went as far as altercations between the protestors and police forces occurred (Šnídl 2021). It is without a doubt that such pandemic reality in Slovakia was largely cause by the constant spread of Russian disinformation narratives.

With this in mind and the current situation in Ukraine, it is impossible to look for explanations to the rise of extremism and far-right relevance in Slovakia, without connecting it to the Russian hybrid strategy seeking EU destabilization. In addition to the spread of disinformation, a significant security concern for the intelligence community was comprised by the presence of the notorious Russian motorcycle club with close ties to Putin, *"Noční Vlci" (Night Wolves)* establishing their European base on the Slovak territory and interacting with locals as well as politicians, or the activities of paramilitary organization such as "Slovenskí Branci" (Slovak Conscripts) considering themselves as allies of Putin's Russia (Golianová and Kazharski 2020). Even a week before the latest Russian invasion on the territory of Ukraine, the discourse of SMER-SD, LSNS and Republika[1] has been accusing the government, the parliament

---

1   Newly established far-right party constituting of politicians that left LSNS due to internal discords. Despite considering themselves as a traditional political party different from the LSNS party, their extremist tendencies are undeniable. More concerning, the party consists of high profile members such as a former military attaché, police investigative or a former officer of the Military Intelligence service. Hence, an arising concern of extremist tendencies present in the Slovak state

members of the collation and the president Zuzana Čapútová of treason due to the signature of a defense cooperation agreement with the United States, hanging billboards with such statements all around Slovakia (Osvaldová 2022).

Later, with an obvious Russian guilt of aggression, Slovakia still represents an exemplary case of engrained doubt caused by years of Russian disinformation campaigns. Despite the former weeks of the campaign forcing such parties to turn down their pro-Russian discourse, they eventually returned to charge in line with Russian propaganda narratives – questioning authenticity of the various events of atrocities in Ukraine and criticizing the government for providing weapons to Ukraine with claims that it will endanger the country (Webnoviny.sk 2022). Such engrained consequences have been moreover underlined by serious evidences under a recent operation of the Military Intelligence, broking a Russian GRU spying network that sought to recruit nationals for cooperation, among them an university pro-rector or a conspiracy-website journalist (Janicek 2022). For these realities, a recent opinion poll conducted by the Slovak Academy of Science has demonstrated reasons to be even more concerned, where results are showing that one third of the respondents believe that the war in Ukraine was deliberately provoked by the West and Russia only responded to such act (SAV 2022).

CONCLUSION

As can be seen on this case study of far-right extremism in Slovakia, a series of global crises and little time for the institutions as well as for the civil society to recover – grievances can accumulate. A constant accumulation of anxiety does not predict positive governance for any country, even less if that country represents a target of a hybrid strategy enacted by a regional power in order to destabilize the overall EU decision making process. It is too early to presuppose whether such extremist tendencies can transform into terrorist acts by frustrated people due to inflation and recession. However, it remains a fact that the current realities do not demonstrate ordinary behaviour, and disinformation campaigns were able to obscure the behaviour of some individuals. Currently, civilians are ready to verbally assault politicians, send bullets in envelopes, propagate death threats behind their keyboards, or even further, visiting some of the politician's private property and violently protest – such attitude needs to be observed attentively. What is sure for now, that extremist tendencies will not disappear from countries

institutions management.

such as Slovakia where internal political struggle is engaging in a fight for power with the previous corrupt political figures trying to save their neck – in such struggle, spreading disinformation narratives can become a dangerous weapon to establish democratic doubts. Only stable governments that are able to properly communicate with their own population will be able to protect themselves from disinformation campaigns and appease far-right extremist tendencies. Such scenario, however, cannot occur if further boundaries and regulations to secures internet platforms are not set.

REFERENCES

Agius, Christine, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall. 2020. "Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity, Climate Denial and Covid-19" *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21 (4): 432–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/21 567689.2020.1851871

Auger, Vincent A. 2020. "Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14(3): 87–97. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918302.

Dugovič, Matej. 2016. "Kotlebov agresívny poslanec sa vzdal mandátu, nahradí ho ďalší, ktorý útočil na moslimskú rodinu." *Denník N*, March 11, 2016. https://dennikn.sk/402505/kotlebov-agresivny-poslanec-sa-vzdal-mandatu-nahradi-ho-dalsi-rasistickymi-recami/

Golianová, Veronika, and Aliaksei Kazharski. 2020. "'The Unsolid' Pro-Kremlin Narratives in Slovak Cultural and Educational Institutions." *The RUSI Journal* 165 (4): 10–21. https://doi.org/1 0.1080/03071847.2020.1796521

Gyárfášová, Oľga, and Martin Slosiarik. 2016. "Voľby do NR SR 2016: Čo charakterizovalo voličov." *Working Papers in Sociology* 1: 1–15. http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/pdf/Working_Papers_in_ Sociology_012016.pdf

Hafez, Farid. 2018. "Street-level and government-level Islamophobia in the Visegrád Four countries." *Patterns of Prejudice* 52(5): 436–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2018.1498440

Janicek, Karel. 2022. "Slovaks charge 2 with spying for Russia's military service." *ABC News,* March 15, 2022. https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/slovaks-charge-spying-russias-military-service-83454193

Kaunert, Christian, Joana de Deus Pereira, and Mike Edwards. 2020. "Thick Europe, ontological security and parochial Europe: The

re-emergence of far-right extremism and terrorism after the refugee crisis of 2015." *European Politics and Society* 23(1): 42–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1842699

Kazharski, Aliaksei. 2018. "The End of 'Central Europe'? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four." *Geopolitics* 23(4): 754–780. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1389720

Kinnvall, Catarina, Ian Manners, and Jennifer Mitzen. 2018. "Introduction to 2018 special issue of European Security: "ontological (in)security in the European Union"." *European Security* 27(3): 249–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497977

Kluknavská, Alena. 2012. "Krajne pravicové strany v parlamentných voľbách 2012 na Slovensku." *Rexter* 10(1): 1–35. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=106849

Lendel, Michal. 2021. "Antivaxeri protestovali pred bytom Jarčušku, kde nebýva. Vyzývali ho, nech vyjde von." *SME*, July 15, 2021. https://kosice.korzar.sme.sk/c/22701880/antivaxeri-protestovali-pred-bytom-jarcusku-kde-nebyva-vyzyvali-ho-nech-vyjde-von.html

Mikušovič, Dušan. 2007. "Slovenská pospolitosť včera a dnes." *Rexter* 5(1): 1–24. https://web.archive.org/web/20180422110238id_/http://casopis.rexter.cz/01-2007/rexter_01_2007.pdf

Osvaldová, Lucia. 2022. "Smer vyvesil bilbordy s fotografiami poslancov, ktorí hlasovali za obrannú zmluvu." *Denník N*, February 23, 2022. https://dennikn.sk/2733691/smer-vyvesil-bilbordy-s-fotografiami-poslancov-ktori-hlasovali-za-obrannu-zmluvu/

Osvaldová, Lucia, Tomáš Benedikovič and Veronika Folentová. 2021. " Polícia po ôsmich hodinách zasiahla a vytlačila z cesty ľudí, ktorí blokovali dopravu v Bratislave." *Denník N*, July 29, 2021. https://dennikn.sk/2485965/niekolko-stoviek-protestujucich-blokuje-dopravu-v-centre-bratislavy-policia-proti-demonstrantom-nezasahuje-foto/

Potočárová, Kamila. 2018. " Slovak Anxiety and Europeanisation: Ontological (In)security in Slovak Foreign Policy ." *The Yale Review of International Studies,* September, 2018. http://yris.yira.org/essays/2601

Rapoport, David C. 2002. "The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September." *Anthropoetics* 8(1): 1–11. https://www.wrldrels.org/SPECIAL%20PROJECTS/JIHADISM/Rapoport%20-%20Four%20Waves%20of%20Terror.pdf

SAV. 2022. "Mesiac od vypuknutia vojny na Ukrajine: Ako nás zasahuje prokremeľská propaganda a dezinformácie o vojne?" *Denník N*,

March 29, 2022. https://dennikn.sk/blog/2788260/mesiac-od-vypuknutia-vojny-na-ukrajine-ako-nas-zasahuje-prokremelska-propaganda-a-dezinformacie-o-vojne/

SME. 2009. "Prieskum: Obavy Slovákov z finančnej krízy narastajú." February 5, 2009. https://index.sme.sk/c/4295149/prieskum-obavy-slovakov-z-financnej-krizy-narastaju.html

Struhár, Pavol. 2016. "Vývoj neoficiálnej pravicovo-extrémistickej scény na Slovensku od roku 1989." *Rexter* 14(1): 1–43. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=343704

Šnídl, Vladimír. 2021. "Supermarkety nevedia, čo robiť s nájazdmi antirúškarov. O pomoc žiadajú políciu, ktorá je často bezradná." *Denník N*, October 29, 2021. https://e.dennikn.sk/2592057/supermarkety-nevedia-co-robit-s-najazdmi-antiruskarov-o-pomoc-ziadaju-policiu-ktora-je-casto-bezradna/

Walter, Aaron. 2019. "Islamophobia in Eastern Europe: Slovakia and the Politics of Hate." *Connections. A Journal for Historians and Area Specialists.* http://www.connections.clio-online.net/article/id/artikel-4705

Webnoviny.sk. 2022. "Korčok odsúdil Ficove výroky, šéf Smeru sa vraj snaží zahmlievať po vzore ruskej propagandy (video)." April 7, 2022. https://www.webnoviny.sk/korcok-odsudil-ficove-vyroky-o-spochybneni-zlocinov-spachanych-na-civilistoch-v-buci-sef-smeru-sa-snazi-zahmlievat/

Weinberg, Leonard, and William Eubank. 2010. "An End to the Fourth Wave of Terrorism?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33(7): 594–602. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.483757

Zvada, Ľubomír. 2018. "Securitization of the Migration Crisis and Islamophobic Rhetoric: The 2016 Slovak Parliamentary Elections as a Case Study." *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 12(2): 216–235. https://sciendo.com/it/article/10.2478/jnmlp-2018-0010.[*]