

Dissertation

Populism as a form of political communication: a case
study of Slovakia

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ES3 – 3A

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05/01/2021

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Word count: 11 530

Executive Summary

This study aims to investigate the differences and commonalities in the degree and level of populism among the contemporary parliamentary political parties in Slovakia before the 2020 general elections. Using the methodological model introduced by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, the research features content analysis performed on the speeches and Facebook posts of the party leaders two months before the elections. The selected methodological tool requires a mixed research approach, relying on both quantitative and qualitative data. Furthermore, the literature review revisits the three major theories relevant for the study of populism and selects the most appropriate one. For this, populism is defined, according to J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, as a political communication style that refers to the people. The findings indicate that the degree and type of populism in Slovakia differ as expected. The only party that fits the criteria of 'complete populism' is ĽSNS, followed by Sme Rodina and OĽANO as only partial populist parties. The three remaining parties, SaS, Za ľudí and SMER-SD, are classified as empty-populists as they resorted to populist discourse only occasionally. The study concludes that the methodological and theoretical frameworks require revision in order to accommodate the components of the Slovak political realm. The recommendations suggest addressing the conceptualization of other political communication style in order to provide for a comparative environment.

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Introduction

“With courage against the system“

Marián Kotleba – ĽSNS

Liberal representative democracy is under siege. The deteriorating economic situation, migration crisis and short-sighted policies have exacerbated electorates' fears of losing the grip on power. The intricate era of post-truth in combination with the widespread use of social media gave rise to a political style that claims to have solutions for all of the above: populism. Ever since 2016, the mainstream political order has been disrupted by this trend, throwing entire countries into petty identity fights whilst ignoring the profound challenges laying ahead.

The 2016 political breakthroughs, such as the US presidential election or the Brexit campaign, led to a rise in research conducted on the topic of populism as well as an increase in media's attention. Well renowned scholars such as H. Kriesi and F. Fukuyama present timely evidence of populism's influence on the contemporary political climate (30 Years of World Politics: What Has Changed?, 2020, p. 17) (Is There a Crisis of Democracy in Europe?, 2020, p. 252). However, the research on populism is often predominantly focused on the western European democracies which have stable democratic institutions that effectively prevent, what L. Diamond would call, a 'democratic recession' (Democracy's Deepening Recession, 2014). In contrast, the political battlegrounds of the Central East Europe (CEE), such as Slovakia, had little time to re-build the fundamental pillars of democracy, and a result fell into the whirlwind of democratic recession fueled by populism.

Throughout much of its short history, Slovakia has been run by populist parties. The ruling parties, such as V. Mečiar's HZDS, exploited the communist-impaired political culture utilizing populist appeals. Furthermore, they positioned themselves, according to O. Gyarfášová and P. Učeň, as the underdogs, the allegedly challenger parties, fighting for the ordinary people (Dynamics of New Challenger Parties in Slovakia's Party System, 2020, p. 33-35) . While there is a plethora of articles focused on the HZDS's populist appeals in the 1990s, the study of populism in Slovakia effectively ends in 2016. There has been, quite unfortunately, very little attention paid to the role of populism within the contemporary political partis in a period marked by a number of milestones (2016 - 2020).

Such a delay of the issue at hand manifested itself in the worst possible moment, in the 2020 parliamentary elections. As G. Mesežnikov puts it in his article, one could say that populists are the true winners of the 2020 parliamentary elections (Slovak Elections 2020: Unexpected Implications of the Expected Victory, 2020). This claim, although appealing, lacks any empirical evidence. Hence, this study aims to address the gap in literature and provide for a comprehensive empirical evidence of populist appeals before the 2020 general elections.

For this, the paper presents historical evidence for the case of populism and lays down the prerequisites for the study of such a phenomena in the context of Slovakia. Furthermore, it revisits the three major theories for the study of populism and makes a selection of the most appropriate one: populism as a form of political communication. As for the actors involved, the analysis features only the parties (6) that passed the electoral threshold of 5% during the last parliamentary elections (2020). The results section of this research operates under the premise, argued for by Deegan-Krause and Haughton, that all parties might be populist. Hence rather than perceiving populism as a binary concept, the analysis should take a pragmatic approach toward measuring populism and perceive it as an adjective emphasizing the role of the quantitative data sets (Toward a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism: Types and Degrees of Populist Appeals in the Case of Slovakia, 2009, p. 82). Finally, this paper makes an inquiry into the types of populism adopted by the analyzed parties with the aim to answer the research question: 'What are the differences and commonalities in the degree and type of populism among the political parties in the Slovak parliament, using the theory of political communication?'

Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, the methodology and research methods applied are discussed. First, taking into consideration the literature review, the research takes a thematic approach. For this, a number of authors with varying theoretical approaches to the study of populism are consulted due to the elusiveness of the concept and absence of adequate canonical texts.

Second, the research takes the form of content analysis in which both quantitative and qualitative data sets play role. Content analysis seems to be the most suitable method for studying populism within parties' discourse as argued by Krippendorff as well as J. Jagers and S. Walgrave (Content Analysis An Introduction to Its Methodology , 2004, p. 64) (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 324-5). In order to perform an accurate content analysis, it is necessary to adopt, according to O'Leary, a mixed research approach (The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project, 2017, p. 164). For this, this dissertation adopts a qualitative approach with acceptance of quantitative data, meaning that the content of a political message is interpreted in holistic terms whilst taking into consideration the number (amount) and type of references to 'the people'. This research method copies the method adopted by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave in their study of Belgian populism, and therefore enjoys the much needed empirical credibility (Populism as political communication style, 2005).

Moreover, following P. Taggart's notion of the 'chameleonic' nature of populism, a case study approach is practically inevitable (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 70). Populism needs to be assessed, and the messages analyzed, in a particular context in order to provide for a clear picture. For this, the paper follows the case study method which, according to Yin, allows to compare in a comparative research fashion multiple units of analysis (the six selected parties) without changing the overarching context of Slovak politics. (Case study research: Design and methods , 2003, p. 41).

For the qualitative integrity of this research, two unstructured personal (online) interviews were conducted with leading scholars in the field of Slovak populism; a proponent of ideational approach to populism P. Učeň and a proponent of thin-ideology/performative style approach G. Mesežnikov.

Thirdly, this thesis has potential limitations. The primary constrain is the deviation of authors, and hence a limited number of the theories for the study of populism, within the academic community. Given the prevalence of the ideational approach to populism, there is a lack of proper conceptualization within the theory of populism as a political communication strategy as well as little disagreement among its

proponents. Furthermore as T. Pauwels argues, the content analysis method suffers often from irregular sampling as well as interpretative and coding bias (Measuring Populism: A Quantitative Text Analysis of Party Literature in Belgium, 2011, p. 102). This is, however, countered by the acceptance of quantitative data and randomization during the data selection (when applicable). Finally, due to obvious time constraints, the data sets are relatively small for content analysis. Despite this, the results provide for a coherent picture of the analyzed parties.

Data & Design

For populism to be studied empirically, according to Jaspers and Walgrave, “one needs a sample of political communication” (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 324). This study, hence, chooses to perform content analysis on a number of varying communicational channels.

The first one is a pre-election radio debate hosted by B. Závodský (Rádio Express) in which he interviews, using 1 on 1 format, the party leaders of the selected parties. The advantage of a radio debate is in its explosive and direct nature which allows party leaders to talk in a less constrained manner. The leaders had 10 minutes of speech and were asked a set of roughly similar questions. The limitation here is the absence of ĽSNS and its leader Kotleba who did not accept the invitation.

Second, two pre-election debates hosted by Tv Markíza (a private media company) were selected. The leaders of the six parties were divided according to their, then valid, preferences. The polls leading five parties (OĽANO, SMER-SD, Za Ľudí, PS/SPOLU, ĽSNS) were placed in one group, while the minor parties (SaS, Sme Rodina, SNS and KDH) were bundled in another. In both discussions, the topics changed frequently which allowed for a variety of opinions on a number of issues. In both groups the leaders had 9 minutes of discussion time and 1 minute of monologue for their final message to voters.

Third, the last official pre-election TV debate of 2020 was chosen due to the fact that all selected parties and their leaders were present. The debate was hosted and moderated by the public service broadcaster RTVS which ensured a relative objectivity as for the questions asked. Again, the leaders had 10 minutes of speech which could have been used to either answer questions or react to other leaders' answers.

Finally, three randomly selected party leaders' Facebook posts, from 01/01/2020 to 29/02/2020, have been included in this study with one exception. This exception was ĽSNS, because its leader had his Facebook profile deleted as it had been violating the Facebook community guidelines.

Therefore, each party was analyzed on 30 minutes of speech and three Facebook posts. From this, units of analysis, sentences, were extracted drawing on, as J. Jagers and S. Walgrave put it, the concept of thin populism as a “a heuristic device to select specific excerpts” (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 325)(see Appendix 1). To select the excerpts, M. Cranmer’s refined selection based on J. Jagers and S. Walgrave’s method was used (Populist communication and publicity: an empirical study of contextual differences in Switzerland, 2011, p. 292).

Afterwards, these selected excerpts were assessed using J. Jagers and S. Walgrave’s method. The method distinguishes between 3 distinct populist appeals: the references to ‘the people’, anti-elitist and exclusionary stance. Consequently, the parties were classified as one of four populist types according to J. Jagers and S. Walgrave’s typology tool. (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 322).

Ultimately, despite the limitations, the thematic approach to the literature review and content analysis combined with the qualitative research methods have formed a coherent methodological approach that allowed for a factual approach to the research question : ‘What are the differences and commonalities in the degree and type of populism among the political parties in the Slovak parliament, using the theory of political communication?’

Literature review

It has become a tradition to open a paper on populism, as P. Učeň puts it, with a prolonged debate on the ambiguity of the concept (Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe, 2007, p. 49). It is indeed an elusive term which seems to offer, as it happens in humanities, a myriad of interpretations. It would be therefore of little use to start this chapter with a definite and all-encompassing definition. It might, however, be useful and easier to start by stating what populism is not.

Populism, although often used interchangeably in the popular discourse, is neither demagoguery nor opportunism, as C. Mudde puts it (The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 543). It appears to be a very distinctive approach to politics that, albeit experiencing a rebirth, has been active and operating under the mainstream radar for roughly a century. The conventional political conflicts of the recent decades, such as liberalism versus conservatism, have shifted toward conflicts based on identity and class struggle which gave rise in prominence to populist movements and their respective leaders. This in return gave an impetus to the study of populism.

Hence, this literature review aims to provide for a comprehensive historical overview of the development of populism for the case of Slovakia which serves as the primary building block for further research. Second, the review presents a refined theoretical framework introducing three major theories used for the study of populism: populism as an ideology, populism as a pathology of representative democracy and populism as a form of political communication.

Understanding populism: a historical perspective

The popular discourse and academic narrative, as argued for by Hawkins & Kaltwasser, portray populism as a novelty phenomenon, in spite of the fact that it is not. It was not until 2016, and a few heated campaigns later, that newspapers and political journals have become overwhelmed by mentions of populism (What the (Ideational) Study of Populism Can Teach us, and What It Can't, 2017, p. 526). To prove wrong, M. Canovan (1981) in her book "Populism" presents seven types of populism based on historical empirical evidence dating back to the agrarian movements of the late 19th century (p. 13). It would, however, be of little use for this study to present a detailed genealogy of populist conceptualization that cuts across centuries and continents due to the fact that Slovakia, as a sovereign and independent state, was formed in 1993. Instead, this study focuses solely on the period of political populism, as conceptualized by C. Mudde, in the 1990s and early 2000s to examine, and establish, the

prerequisites for the contemporary populist appeals (In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe, 2000, p. 44).

Political populism as an overarching concept of Slovak politics

The inquiry into the concept of populism must start with an overarching concept encompassing the basic ideas and notions. For this, political populism is the prerequisite for further research. Political populism, also known as 'politicians' populism,' according to M. Canovan, is an approach to politics that encompasses a number of elements but predominantly relies on the unified entity of 'the people' (Populism, 1981, p. 260).

First, the perception of political populism by laypeople and mainstream politicians differs based on geography. While the western political populism has been, at least historically speaking, always connected to the 'outsider' on the right side of the political spectrum and considered a pariah by the mainstream political parties, populist parties in the CEE (Central Eastern Europe) countries are considered to be 'koalitionsfähing'¹, according to C. Mudde (In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe, 2000, p. 44-45).

Second, populist parties within the CEE bloc in the 1990 represented, as P. Učeň argues, a number of radical ideologies, for example HZDS embraced radical ethno-nationalism (Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe, 2007, p. 50). This approach to politics, described as hard-populism by Mesežnikov, Gyarfášová, Bútora and Kollár, evolved with the increasing 'western' pressure into a more centrist one, according to P. Učeň (Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe, 2007, p. 50). The change, brought around by the centrist approach to populism, was mostly visible in the way how the anti-establishment appeal was channeled. It went from the traditional and general anti-elite appeals to appeals focused on government transparency and accountability (Učeň, Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe, 2007, p. 50).

Lastly, a prominent feature of modern political populism is its use of innovative communication strategies involving particular identity appeals which distinguishes it from its predecessors and the mainstream established parties. The use of such communication toolkits allows for a better classification which implies that political populism shall be researched empirically by utilizing parties' discourse.

¹ koalitionsfähing = capable of forming a coalition

Chronology of Slovak politics

In order to understand populism and its appeals, it is of utmost importance to submit to P. Taggart's notion of its chameleonic nature (*Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics*, 2002, p. 70). Hence, this chapter offers a quick glance at the Slovak political climate before the 2020 elections, starting with the state's democratic transformation of the 1990s.

The major problem of the 1990s politics was the combination of communist legacy, decimated economy, and crippled political culture. This combination was thus the prerequisite for the populist appeals to come. C. Mudde agrees with this notion and encourages to look at the socio-economic values among the masses. He claims that the contemporary populations in the CEE bloc that have been socialized under the communist regime are now extremely prone to economic populist appeals. The emerging states, after 1989, continued the path of a welfare state creating a fertile soil for populists movements that claim to protect 'the people' against the neoliberal elite's reforms (*In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe*, 2000, p. 43).

G. Mesežnikov agrees with this claim as he argues that the Slovak state has been threatened by an antiliberal populist movements at least three times in its short history; 1993-1998, 2006-2010, 2016-2020. He further explains that populism has always tried to capitalize on the opposition to economic reforms which brought around socio-economic problems (*Populizmus a liberálna demokracia: skúsenosti Slovenska, aktuálne výzvy*, n.d).

That being said, the underlying precondition for the rise of populism, the state of societal wellbeing, was reflected on the case of VPN (Public Against Violence). While VPN won the first free elections, proposed liberal agenda and set the country's economic course accordingly, it did not last long as the executive power was soon seized by HZDS (Movement for Democratic Slovakia) and SNS (Slovak National Party) (*Štatistický Úrad SR*, 1994). The government of the aforementioned parties, lasting from 1994 to 1998, is characterized by strong illiberal democratic practices and semi-authoritarian style of governance, which undermined the stability of the watchdog institutions. This resulted, according to Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, Bútora and Kollár, in an immense accumulation of power and wealth by the ruling elites creating a societal divide between 'the people' and 'the elite' (*Populist politics and liberal democracy in central and Eastern Europe*, 2008, p. 108).

This period of illiberal populist governance was interrupted by two successive, and largely successful, governments formed by M. Dzurinda, from 1998 to 2006. He formed the government with other opposition parties despite the fact that V. Mečiar's HZDS won both parliamentary elections (in 1998 and 2002). (Štatistický Úrad SR, 1998) (Štatistický Úrad SR, 2002). Although Dzurinda's reforms significantly improved the economic situation of Slovakia during the period of democratic transition, the liberal reforms returned populism back onto the central stage as the newly formed political group, SMER, seized the victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

SMER was founded by a 'maverick' leftist politician R. Fico in 1999 and presented itself, as P. Učeň puts it, as a party without ideology as it allegedly distracts politicians from the real problems and disconnects them from the ordinary people (Učeň, *Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe*, 2007, p. 55). Moreover, R. Fico criticized partisanship and argued for a 'third way' of doing politics. Despite preaching such an approach, SMER effectively absorbed what was left of the leftist parties and rebranded itself, just before the elections, as SMER-SD (social democracy) (Gális, 2020) (Učeň, *Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe*, 2007, p. 57). After the 2006 elections, SMER-SD formed a coalition with two other, already well established, populist parties: SNS and HZDS.

The Slovak political realm was shaken 10 year later, when the far-right extremist party ĽSNS obtained 14 out of 150 seats in the Slovak parliament (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, n.d). As A. Kazharski writes, this electoral success needs to be assessed in a broader context. First, there was a global revival of the 'new-right' parties in 2016. All of them, ĽSNS included, capitalized on the nationalist sentiments, such as the European migrations crisis (Kazharski, 2019, p. 394-395). Despite achieving a partial success in the elections, ĽSNS, due to its radical stance, played only a minor role in the decision-making as it was politically marginalized. The success of an allegedly neo-nazi party utilizing populism was supposed to be a warning for the years to come as it proved that such strategies are highly rewarding and cost-effective.

It was, however, not until 2018 that Slovakia was internally prepared for a political renewal. The murder of an investigative journalist J. Kuciak revealed a great number of connections that the coalition, namely SMER-SD and SNS, maintained with mafia organizations such as 'Ndrangheta. As a result, a nation-wide discussion fueled by the opposition parties was initiated. For this crisis of legitimacy, several new political actors emerged and fought fiercely during the 2020 parliamentary elections as the scent of power was irresistible. The majority of them promised to get rid of, following P. Učeň's notion of centrist populism, 'the elite' and improve the transparency and governance of state money.

This generational shift to a 'softer' version of populism, one that perceives power as the means rather than the goal, marked a significant milestone in the way how political parties communicate (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, Bútora, & Kollár, 2008) (Mesežnikov, *Populizmus a liberálna demokracia: skúsenosti Slovenska, aktuálne výzvy*, n.d).

Theoretical Framework

Populism, despite its rich historical appearance, has become one of the most contested concepts within the political science research. It happens very often that scholars within the field of social science cannot agree on definitions and tend to offer varying interpretations. The issue at hand is well described by P. Taggart who claims that populism is of "chameleonic" nature (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 70). This simply highlights the intrinsic ability of populism to adapt to the socio-economic conditions of the context it operates in which makes the study of such a phenomenon onerous. The ambiguity surrounding the concept gave rise to multiple theories, ranging from an ideological to a discourse approach. This, however, means that there is little deviation or disagreement among the authors within a particular theory. Therefore, this chapter visits the three major theories and provides for a coherent conceptualization of components found in party discourse.

C. Mudde: Populism as an ideology

The first widely accepted definition of populism seems to find success presenting the concept as a thin-centered ideology. The main proponent of this theory is C. Mudde who defines it as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people" (The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 543). As mentioned, populism, according to C. Mudde, follows the Freeden's concept of thin ideology. For this, populism does not present a refined world-view, but rather demonstrates a deep-rooted interest in a narrow set of key concepts, such as 'the people', without necessarily having its own distinct outlook on state's functioning (Freeden, *Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?*, 2002, p. 750).

Furthermore, as C. Mudde puts it, populism as an ideology exhibits a Manichean approach to politics (The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 543). This approach is binary, meaning that there is only evil and good, foes and friends, nothing in between. As a result, such an approach forms the necessary basis for the distinction between the good 'people' and the corrupted 'elite'. Interestingly, as M. Canovan adds, populism is inherently a challenging movement as it "...challenges not only established power-holders but also elite

values” (Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy, 1999, p. 3). This normative approach allows populists to easily create a deceiving narrative without being obliged to provide any empirical evidence of a ‘corrupted behavior’.

In addition, C. Mudde argues that for populism to work it needs the fertile environment of representative democracy (The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 561). No other system of politics offers such a unique relationship between the represented and representatives, which is exploited by populists claiming that ‘the elite’ favors its own interests at the expense of ‘the people’ and their wellbeing. This presents a dilemma on its own as it proposes that ‘the people’, the demos, do no longer have power in their hands.

Despite such claims, C. Mudde believes that populists are reformists rather than revolutionary, and therefore do not oppose the party system of representation directly (The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 546). Instead, they argue to be the new kind of party, often called ‘the third way’, and oppose the well-established mainstream parties. The same principle applies to the process of policy crafting; populists rarely oppose experts who draft the policies as long as they are in line with the ‘will of the people’ (Mudde, The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 547).

Although this definition of populism is easy to grasp and offers the much needed insight, P. Taggart argues that it can be merely classified as an ideology. He believes that populism is just a pathology of representative democracy (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002).

P. Taggart: Populism as a pathology of representative democracy

The context of representative democracy seems to be one of the convergence points for scholars studying populism. In comparison with pundits who offer a comprehensive definition of populism based on its historical development, P. Taggart focuses on the contemporary populist movements that have risen consequently with far-right nationalism. These movements, despite being geographically scattered, share a common causality which seems to be a crisis of legitimacy within liberal democracy and its institutions. P. Taggart argues that populism, given its anti-pluralist stance, is inherently hostile towards representative politics, albeit it is the principle of representation that provides populists with the means, or rather conditions, under which they can organize and influence the policy creation (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 66).

In contrast to scholars who downplay the importance of charisma and leadership, such as C. Reinemann, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, J. Strömbäck, C.H. de Vreese and C. Mudde, P. Taggart recognizes the importance of

individual charisma and centralized leadership of a populist party (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 67). It is typical for a populist party to struggle with leadership succession and party sustainability (Taggart, Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe, 2004, p. 270). The case of Slovakia provides for a plethora of examples in which the party's 'founding father' either did not allow for a succession or the party became dysfunctional after the leader's retirement. According to J. Baránek (as cited in Minarechová, 2012, p.4) , this became apparent after HZDS's V. Mečiar retired and the party became obsolete in the voters' minds. This personalization of leadership allows for an easier governance within the party as well as for a far less burdensome process of garnering political support.

The second trait of populism as pathological sign is the reference to a 'heartland'. This term was introduced by P. Taggart in 2002 and refers back to the notion of 'thinness'. According to P. Taggart, populism, as it lacks the core values present in mainstream parties, creates a vision that 'sells' (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, p. 67). This vision is a retrospective construction of the world, the heartland. It presents the past in a superior way (in comparison to the contemporary era), appealing to the sentiment of the good old days of national sovereignty and power being allocated in people's hands. Moreover, just like the notion of 'the people', this heartland is also hazy lacking any specific definition or historical moments for that matter. P. Taggart summarizes it as follows, "the essence of the heartland is not that of a utopia, but that there was a tried and tested 'good life' before the corruption and distortions of the present" (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 68).

All of the features above present populism as a protest movement embodying the basic instinct of any political society; the ruled against the rulers. For this, populism is treated, in the writings P. Taggart, as an illness of representative democracy (Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe, 2004) (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002). He further claims that populists are reluctantly political as they claim to represent the unrepresented within the system of representative democracy, a system they aim to reform or straight-forward abolish (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 69). In addition to this, P. Taggart highlights the performance of populism in times of an imminent crisis (for example the European migration crisis of 2015/16 or COVID-19 pandemic) during which populism exploits the inability of representative democracy to react quickly to deal with such issues (Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe, 2004, p. 275). For the aforementioned characteristics, populism is, according to P. Taggart, only a mirror and the ultimate

tolerance tester for the political system of liberal representative democracy (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 79).

Populism as a form of political communication

Populism, on the contrary to the ideational approach, is not perceived as a binary element of politics by a number of researchers. Although the aforementioned approaches to the study of populism have crafted nuanced definitions, they apply the definition in a substantive sense. It is, however, exactly this approach that showcases the limitations of research on the topic of populism, as K. Deegan-Krause and T. Haughton write (Toward a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism: Types and Degrees of Populist Appeals in the Case of Slovakia, 2009, p. 822). According to D. Leaman, populism is often measured in a mathematic style, meaning that a political party (or its leader) is either a populist or not (Review: Changing Faces of Populism in Latin America: Masks, Makeovers, and Enduring Features, 2004, p. 319).

P. Cammack offers an insightful solution to this problem, and that is to treat populism as an adjective, or a degree for that matter, rather than a noun (The resurgence of populism in Latin America, 2000, p. 155). However in order to do that, an empirical core, a list of measurable elements, is required. This notion is well founded on the research of two groups, C. Reinemann, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, J. Strömbäck, C.H. de Vreese and J. Jagers & S. Walgrave, which treat populism as a form of political communication and analyze the content of communication channels and political messages, providing for a valuable theoretical framework.

According to F. Panizza, “This approach understands populism as an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the 'underdogs') and its 'other'” (Populism and the Mirror of Democracy, 2005, p. 3). This is well supported by the minimal definition crafted by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave. The minimal definition, the thin-version of populism, refers to “a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people” (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 322). This is line with what M. Canovan classifies as politician's populism, which distinguishes itself by its odd proximity to the interests of ordinary people (Populism, 1981, p. 261).

On the other hand, M. Cranmer goes a step further and rather than accepting any reference to 'the people', she creates a much more nuanced version of thin-populism. According to her paper, the references to 'the people' can be treated as populist insofar as they defend the will of 'the people', imply

accountability to 'the people' and/or legitimize the speaker's claim by referring to 'the people' (Populist communication and publicity: an empirical study of contextual differences in Switzerland, 2011, p. 292). Therefore, the study of populism in this way indicates looking at the features and elements of such a communication that stem from the motives and goals of the political actors involved as argued for by Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, and de Vreese (Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects, 2017, p. 13).

While this minimal conceptualization of populism effectively encompasses all political parties in representative democracy, a thick version of populism is needed to provide for a refined selection method applicable in all cases. For the thick version, J. Jaspers and S. Walgrave put forward three key elements of populist communication: reference to 'the people', anti-elitist stance and exclusion of out-groups (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 322). Hence, thick-populism "refers to the people, vents anti-establishment ideas and simultaneously excludes certain population categories" (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 322).

Although considered negligible for the study of populism, according to C. Reinemann, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, J. Strömbäck and C.H. de Vreese, these elements are usually accompanied by a discourse featuring the "narrative of crisis, tabloid-like style, rhetorical features such as colloquial and emotion language", demagoguery and harshness aimed at opponents (Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects, 2017, p. 14). To add to this, C. Mudde claims that the populist discourse is characterized by dominance of perceptions rather than facts (The Populist Zeitgeist, 2004, p. 553).

The limitation of this approach is well summarized in the writing of J. Jagers and S. Walgrave who claim that the critical problem is the practical confusion it creates. (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 314). While the reference to 'the people' is inextricably linked to populism, the other two features, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups, can be linked to any other ideology or political movement.

The anti-elitist, vertical, antagonism implies that the enemies of the ordinary citizens are the political elites who have become estranged from their constituents, and cater to themselves rather than to the demos. In contrast to the vertical division, the exclusion of out-groups, the horizontal division, suggests that the evil is within the society (within 'the people'), and therefore must be blamed for all the hardship and misfortune. Quintessentially, ethnical and racial minorities as well as legal entities (financial groups for

example) are often the primary target of the exclusionary appeals. This, however, makes identification of populism much harder as it makes the political scenery, and political messages for that matter, blurry (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 315).

To operationalize this approach, J. Jagers and S. Walgrave propose four types of populism: empty populism, exclusionary populism, anti-elitist populism, and complete populism (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 314).

Empty populism is in line with the concept of thin-populism as it is used for any political actor that uses references to 'the people' without necessarily including anti-elitist or exclusive appeals. This is characteristic for established mainstream political actors who use this as a strategy to garner support or simply address the electorate. In contrast, complete populism is a combination of anti-elitist and exclusionary appeals that simultaneously refer to the construction of 'the people'. The two other types are self-explanatory. A political actor is classified as an anti-elite populist if the majority of his appeals are of corresponding nature (anti-elitist in this case). This same applies for the exclusionary type (Jagers & Walgrave, 2005) (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, *Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects*, 2017) (Jagers & Walgrave, 2005).

The main limitation of this approach is argued by C. Reinemann, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, J. Strömbäck and C.H. de Vreese who point out that such an approach might limit the scope only to four seemingly viable options. They recommend taking into consideration also non-populist actors as it might provide for the much needed comparison. Moreover, looking into other combinations, such as appeals that include both anti-elitist and exclusionary stance yet miss the appeal to 'the people', might be helpful to create a more accurate populist axis (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, *Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects*, 2017, p. 15).

The theoretical framework caters to the research requirements and provides for a list of existing literature and theories on the topic of populism. Despite the prevalence of C. Mudde's theory in the contemporary academia, the more accurate, insofar as party discourse is considered, theory introduced by J. Jaspers and S. Walgrave is used.

Results

Interviews

Given the importance of the contextual elements when it comes to populism, experts on the topic of Slovak politics, and populism in particular, were invited for unstructured interviews. The interviewees, P. Učeň and G. Mesežnikov, outlined their take on populism and provided for a comprehensive assessment of the contemporary political parties.

First, the interviewees disagree, with each other, on the approach to the study of populism. While P. Učeň claimed that populism needs to be treated as a distinct ideology insofar as it follows Freeden's concept of ideology, G. Mesežnikov was not so keen on this approach. In his point of view, populism is definitely not a distinct ideology, but a thin-ideology which is heavily influenced by particular performative aspects. What G. Mesežnikov, according to P. Učeň, does not take into account is the conceptualization. The ideational approach to populism offers a much more stable base for research as the conceptualization is more coherent (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

Second, P. Učeň explained the differences between anti-system and anti-establishment appeals. Although there is a substantial lack of proper conceptualization, some researchers argue that anti-establishment equals anti-elitist, at least on the abstract level, and is the basic precondition for being populist. Anti-system appeals are, according to the interviewee, clearly visible paradigms of actions that challenge "the basic assumptions on which the relationship with the system are based". On the other hand, anti-establishment party does not propose a major change to the system, or rules of the game for that matter, it highlights the incapacity (or lack of willingness) of the contemporary political actors to manage the system properly (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

In addition, there is a clear distinction between anti-incumbent and anti-establishment. Anti-incumbent encompasses the traditional means through which opposition channels its critique. On the other hand, anti-establishment, whose elements were mentioned above, "includes something more substantial" as P. Učeň put it. Anti-establishment appeals claim that those in power can never properly cater to their electorate, and for this there needs to be a reform in the system (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

The problem with anti-establishment appeals arises when the mainstream parties themselves are populist. This is a point of convergence for both experts as they agree that the current definitions do not

fit the case of Slovakia. The lack of proper conceptualization of anti-establishment, according to both interviewees, means that measuring populism within the ruling parties will always be either distorted, and hence inaccurate, or not possible at all (Učeň, Populism in Slovakia, 2020) (Mesežnikov, Populism in Slovakia, 2020).

G. Mesežnikov added to this by pointing out the importance of historical context. For him, there has always been a clear dichotomy between hard and soft populism. Hard populism is embodied in Mečiar's government, very authoritative and ethno-nationalist. On the other hand, soft populism, represented by Smer-SD in 2006, worked more directly with the will of the people and profiled themselves as the popular redeemers. This line between the two started to fade away as the period of democratic transition ended. The hard approach to populism can be observed in the contemporary Europe in two instances: PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary. This effectively means that no parliamentary party is employing the elements of hard populism (Učeň, Populism in Slovakia, 2020) (Mesežnikov, Populism in Slovakia, 2020).

Finally, the interviewees provided an in-depth analysis of all parliamentary parties whilst revisiting their assumptions regarding populism.

The first analyzed party was Sme Rodina (We are Family) and its leader B. Kollár. P. Učeň declared that this party is "a total puzzle.". Ideationally, this party seems to offer only very occasional elements of populism. However in 2016, the party could have been labelled as national populist, because they relied extensively on the ethno-national card amidst the migration crisis, according to G. Mesežnikov. Now, their attitude to power has changed. Instead of looking to be a parliamentary party, they aspired to become an integral part of the new government. This implies that their appeals and approach to politics had to be revamped and changed completely. While in 2016 they organized marches against migration with public figures such as Le Pen or Salvini, in 2020 they seem to exploit their position in power without any clear ideological agenda in order to gain political capital. For this, the party, as a set of abstract ideological ideas, plays only a marginal role in its voters' minds, whereas the leadership and appeals of B. Kollár seem to resonate more with Sme Rodina's electorate. This provides for a stable electorate base, which demands the importance of charismatic, leadership-oriented personalities within populist parties, as P. Taggart argues (Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics, 2002, p. 67) (Učeň, Populism in Slovakia, 2020) (Mesežnikov, Populism in Slovakia, 2020).

Interestingly, P. Učeň believes B. Kollár does not represent anything, he embodies a particular lifestyle that is envied by many. This lifestyle justifies the people's failings, their immorality and averageness. For this, he mobilizes, as it happens with populist appeals, quite a large number of voters coming from varying backgrounds. To conclude, both interviewees were inclined to say that Sme Rodina is a populist party, because in essence the populist representation should not represent but embody the 'volonté general', and that is what B. Kollár does (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

In the same fashion, SMER-SD (Direction – Social Democracy) and R. Fico (or P. Pellegrini for that matter) managed to stay in power over a decade. R. Fico has functioned as de facto the country's leader until the 2020 elections. He marketed himself and his movement as the 'third way' which was, according to P. Učeň, very different from Mečiar. This notion is confirmed by G. Mesežnikov who calls it soft populism. For this, his electorate believed that SMER-SD, and namely R. Fico, was 'the popular redeemer' in the government who would step in and save them. The interviewees both came to the conclusion that during his reign, he had behaved and pursued policies just like any other populist; profiling the party as the embodiment of the general will whilst making sure the leadership of the party becomes the elite (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

Moreover, P. Učeň proposed to look at SMER-SD as a purpose party. It has been driven by pragmatism; get to and retain power. After the chasm within its leadership, HLAS was created and drained the vast majority of SMER-SD's voters. To counter this, R. Fico has been trying to leech voters from other anti-systemic parties through conspiracies and popular protests. The experts are very skeptical about R. Fico's success in this field as they believe there are people/movements who are more 'believable and genuine'. SMER-SD can be effectively considered as a purpose party without any ideology that might use populism as a vehicle to garner popular support (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

On the contrary to the (electorally) more successful parties, *Za ľudí* (For the people), a project of the ex-president A. Kiska, did not meet the public expectations. According to P. Učeň, this party confirms the theory of volatility of Slovak voters. The voters do not follow the traditional path of loyalty or party allegiance. Instead, Slovak voters revisit their feelings regarding politics moments before the elections and vote accordingly. *Za ľudí* sought to challenge the mainstream through a broad set of virtues rather than the head-on approach adopted by OĽANO for example. For G. Mesežnikov, this is a typical approach of

programmatic parties. The combination of SMER-SD's anticampaign against the leader, A. Kiska, and the party's 'lukewarm' approach to politics led to the current situation in which the party's preferences are below the 5% threshold. Although the party challenged the mainstream, and de facto the establishment, it is not a populist party according to both experts. Much like SaS, the people within the party are well-profiled politicians who represent their electorate, not the general will (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (SME, 2020).

The same, however, cannot be said about OĽANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities). According to P. Učeň, OĽANO has been and always will be an anti-party/anti-establishment party that will reinvent itself all the time. The element that distinguishes it from all the other parties is the fact that it is not a real party as the western standard understands it. The party is a group, a team, of people put together to get into power and fight for the problems of ordinary people. The party lacks any internal structure as well as has very few actual members. Their ultimate vehicle is the charismatic leader who is always close to the electorate, as G. Mesežnikov put it. Given their recent drop in preferences due to the allegedly poor governance of the corona measures (from 25 to 14%) and the personal conflicts within the coalition (Matovič vs. Sulík), they will either discredit themselves completely or reinvent themselves in the upcoming elections. However, P. Učeň put it, they will be again an anti-establishment, anti-party and anti-corruption party. G. Mesežnikov concluded this part with a claim that OĽANO is a soft populist party with a very confrontational style of doing politics which effectively bars it from running the government efficiently (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Katuška, 2020).

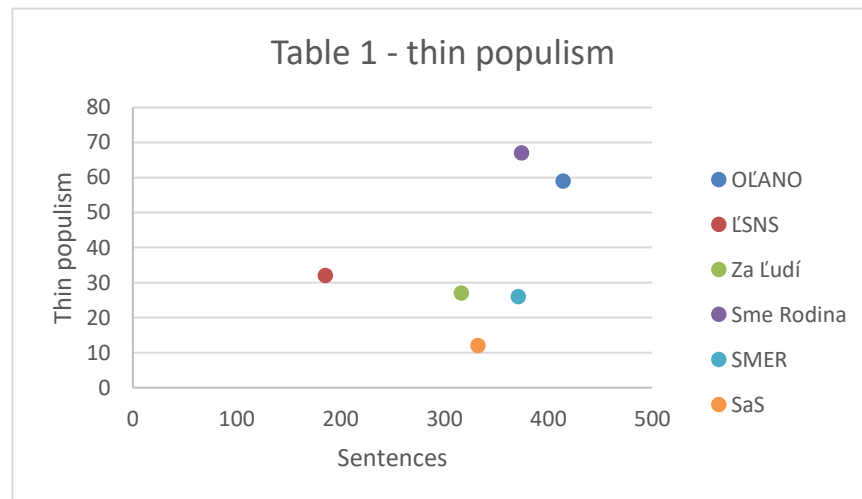
The opposite to OĽANO is SaS (Freedom and Solidarity). The party, quoting P. Učeň, is "intentionally elitist". They have never claimed that the 'volonté general' should be realized. They deliberately profile themselves as experts who know much more than the ordinary people, and are willing to guide and shape the demos to a better version of itself. This party was not interesting for either expert as they were convinced that there are no elements of populism in both the discourse and ideology of the party. The concluding remark of P. Učeň is quite accurate, "SaS is the legacy of SDKÚ, it is the emancipated version of liberalism in Slovakia with focus on market and economy", which makes them very niche and distant to the ordinary people (Učeň, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020) (Mesežnikov, *Populism in Slovakia*, 2020).

The only exception to the general rule of thumb when it comes to Slovak populism is ĽSNS (National party – Our Slovakia) and its leader Kotleba. The party has a very stable and loyal electoral base (about 5%), meaning that there is very little voters' volatility in this case. This party is the only truly anti-systemic

alternative for the people dissatisfied with the current status quo. According to the interviewees, the party is not only anti-systemic, but it is also deeply anti-establishment and anti-corruption. They both upheld the claim that labelling ĽSNS as a populist party is not accurate. A much more accurate label, “anti-systemic neofascist party”, was offered by G. Mesežnikov. P. Učeň confirms this notion and claims that it is a far-right party created by extremists who use this anti-systemic feature of populism only as a vehicle to get into power. The party presents itself as the ultimate redeemer of ordinary people. However, their primary goal, according to P. Učeň, is to retain dominance of the anti-systemic sector of appeals, because it provides them with the necessary popular support in order to legitimize the party’s actions (Učeň, Populism in Slovakia, 2020) (Mesežnikov, Populism in Slovakia, 2020).

Thin populism

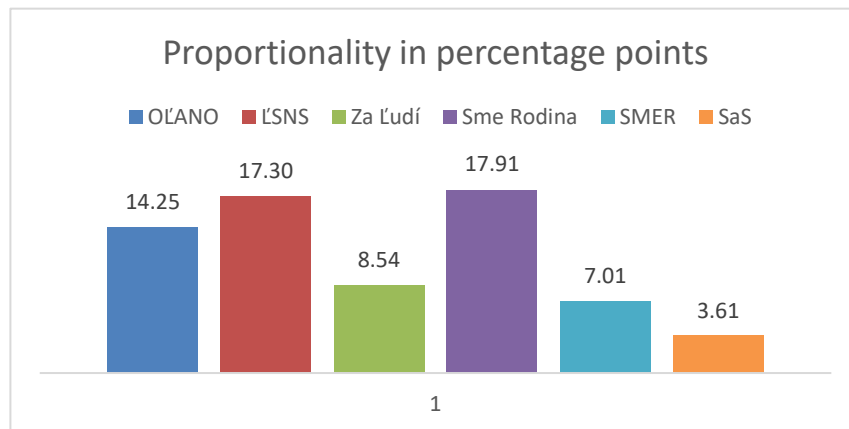
Following the method of J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, the study selected excerpts of party communication in four instances, creating a ‘people-index’ (Populism as political communication style, 2005, p. 326). This index contains excerpts featuring thin-populist elements found in the chosen communication channels.



The graph refers to the proportion of thin-populist sentences to the total number of sentences in absolute terms. The excerpts were chosen in accordance with two theoretical models, namely J. Jagers & S. Walgrave’s and M. Cranmer’s. For a detailed coding table, see Appendix 1. The selected sentences always referred to the people in either a broad or narrow context.

The graph shows that the absolute champion of the populist rhetoric was Sme Rodina (67), closely followed by OĽANO (59) and ĽSNS(32). All three parties were labelled as populist by the experts, and these data confirm this notion. There is a major disparity between these three and other parties.

Contrary to expectations, SMER-SD used thin populism in its communication very occasionally which resulted in a low score (26). As for Za ľudí (27) and SaS (12), they ended up with minor levels of populism in their communication, especially SaS.



However, the position and order of parties change when the people-index is put into relative terms, percentage points. Sme Rodina remained the champion with 17,91%, but ĽSNS swapped places with OĽANO with 17,30% and 14,25% respectively. This implies that ĽSNS, had it been analyzed on the same number of sentences as OĽANO, would have achieved a higher rank in the people-index. Za ľudí remained fourth with 8,54% while SMER-SD stayed consistent with the previous graph reaching 7,01%. The party with the least percentage points (3,61%) was SaS.

To conclude, these indicators form the base for the study of populism in Slovakia. It allows to clearly distinguish between the number of actors and ranks them according to their use of populist rhetorical devices.

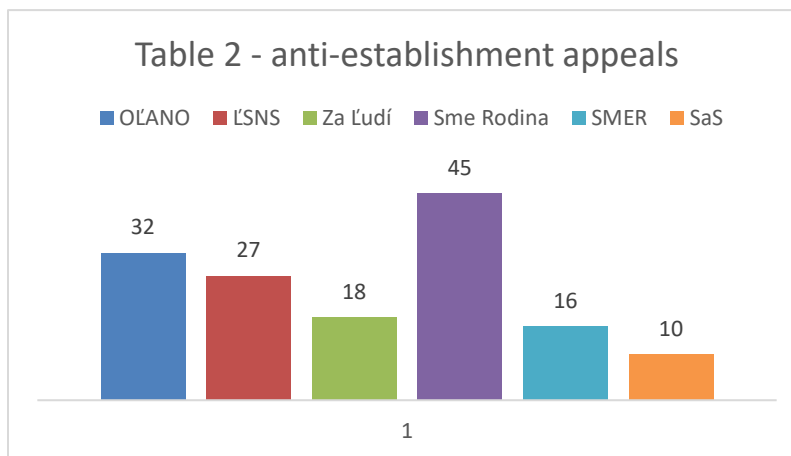
Thick populism

Thick populism, according J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, is the combination of references to ‘the people’ (thin populism) and either anti-establishment or exclusionary appeals (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 322). For this, the study

analyzed the thin populist sentences and allocated them to either the anti-establishment or exclusionary group.

Anti-establishment

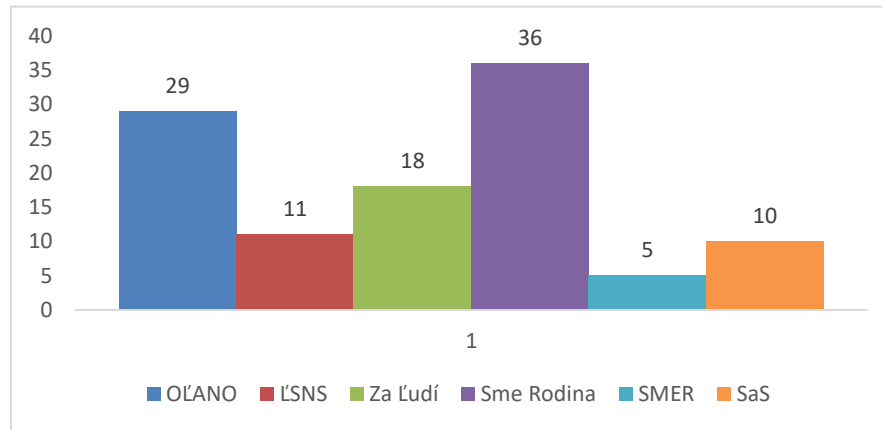
The anti-establishment component in thin populism is conceptualized, according to J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, as the vertical dimension of populism. The paper, following the method of the aforementioned researchers, distinguishes between three types of anti-establishment appeals; anti-state, anti-politics and anti-media (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 317).



This graph represents the number of sentences that contained anti-establishment appeals. The diagram copies, as in proportionality and order, the first one. Sme Rodina used 45 sentences containing anti-establishment appeals, while OĽANO used only 33. The only exception to the general trend was ĽSNS with 27 sentences. While 55% of OĽANO thin-populist sentences contained anti-establishment appeals, for ĽSNS it was 84%. As for the other parties, the numbers decrease gradually without any major differences in comparison to the first graph. Za ľudí used 18 thick populists sentences, while SMER-SD only 16 and SaS 10.

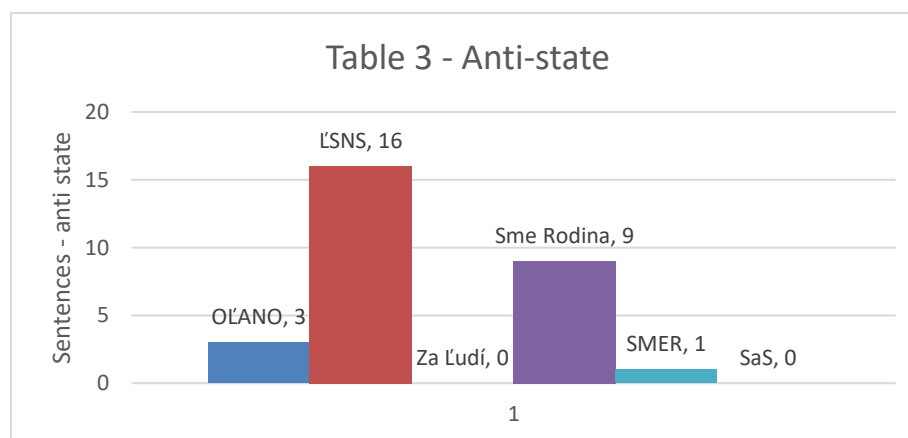
To summarize, thick populism is in direct correlation with thin populism despite the fact that the proportionality (thick / thin) varies without any evident trend.

Anti-Politics



Anti-politics appeals are part of the anti-establishment family and contain critique of either a policy or political actors. In the case of Slovakia, anti-politics appeals seem to be used mainly as a critique of the contemporary government and its practices. Once again, Sme Rodina triumphed this chart with 36 sentences, while OĽANO had only 29. This means, that both of these parties used populism as the primary means of challenging the political establishment, i.e. the parties in the government. Surprisingly, ĽSNS had a lower level of anti-politics appeals (11) than its counterpart Za Ľudí (18). SaS followed the trend of ĽSNS and ended up with only 10 sentences. Finally, SMER-SD ended up with only five instances of anti-politics appeals in its discourse mainly due to their position as the ruling party.

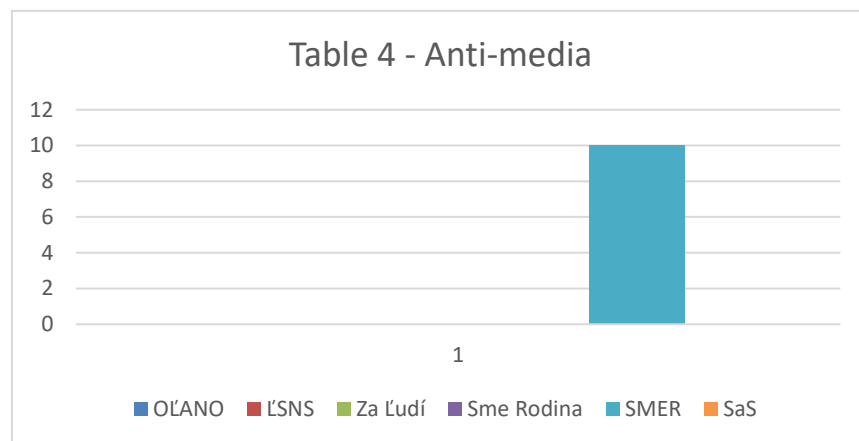
Anti-state



Anti-state appeals, although having an ambiguous name, are not linked to a state per se. They encompass a vast range of appeals connected to the way public services and form of governance function.

The striking difference among the selected parties is the disparity between ĽSNS and other parties. ĽSNS used 16 sentences containing populist messages aimed at exploiting the contemporary form of governance (democracy and open markets). On the other hand, Sme Rodina (9) and OĽANO (3) used such devices only in cases where they criticized a non-functional public service, not democracy or market economy. The other parties used very little to none thick anti-state populism in their discourse which implies that these parties did not resort to populism when they criticized public service or the overarching political arrangement.

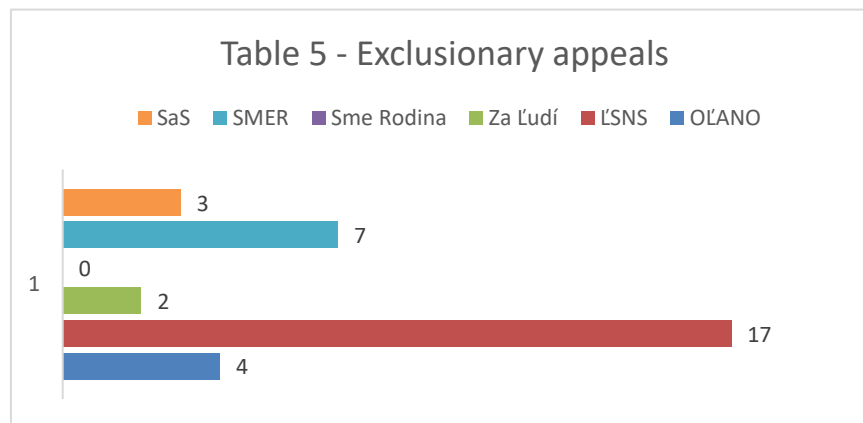
Anti-media



The last component of the anti-establishment appeals is the negative attitudes towards media outlets. As the table shows, there is a significant cleavage between SMER-SD and other selected parties. This highlights the fact that political parties choose their anti-establishment appeals according to their position in politics. SMER-SD was in the government for almost 12 years, meaning that neither the anti-politics nor anti-state appeals are viable options. However when it comes to media, SMER-SD used more anti-media appeals than any other party (10). This is partly caused by the attitude of media outlets towards SMER-SD (and vice versa) as several media have successfully investigated corruption within the party and its connection to mafia.

Exclusionary appeals

The exclusionary element is, according to the theory of J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, the horizontal dimension of populism (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 324). This means that political actors employing such appeals tend to marginalize and 'brand' a specific group of people as a danger for the homogenous society. The appeals cut through all kinds of characteristics, ranging from religion and ethnicity to professions.

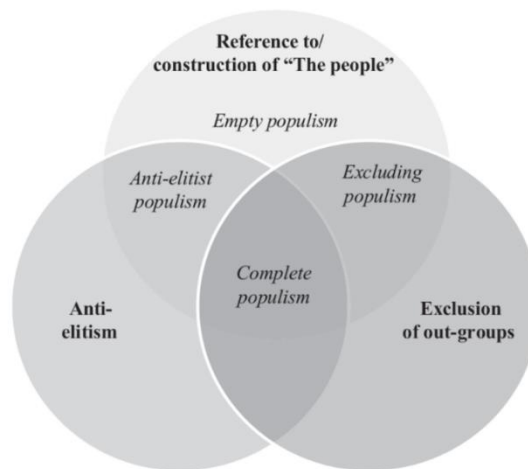


The bar chart displays the number of exclusionary appeals that occurred in the parties' discourse. The selected parties used exclusionary appeals in a greater intensity than initially expected. In this field, ĽSNS used by far the highest number of exclusionary sentences (17), followed by SMER-SD (7). Interestingly, ĽSNS's exclusionary appeals covered a wide range of actors, from ethno-national to financial groups. The other parties resorted to exclusionary populism only occasionally. While OĽANO focused mostly on financial groups, SaS targeted mostly the least economically active citizens. Sme Rodina, although being the front runner in the other categories, did not use a single exclusionary sentence in its discourse.

Overall, the exclusionary rhetorical devices are found mostly among parties that did not score exceptionally high in the anti-establishment or thin populism sections. Furthermore, the exclusionary appeals, in comparison with the total number of sentences, did not account for a single percentage point in most cases. The only exception is ĽSNS with 9,19%. Hence, the parties selected discredit specific groups very rarely.

Typology

The typology, as proposed by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, provides for an empirical conceptualization tool used to clearly distinguish between appeals and actors in the public sphere based on the results of thin and thick populism (Populism as political communication style: an empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium, 2007, p. 324).



According to this Venn diagram, there are four types of populism. The selected Slovak parties all fall within the scope of this tool. The majority of actors is either of an anti-elitist or empty nature.

Sme Rodina, the party triumphing most of the empirical measurements, ended up being a clear anti-elitist populist actor. The winner of the 2020 elections, OĽANO, was put in the same category as it displayed the same discourse paradigm as its coalition partner Sme Rodina.

The major deviation from this trend is ĽSNS. It is the only party in the Slovak parliament that fits the 'complete populism' definition. It utilized a vast range of rhetorical devices encompassing all the criteria of complete populism; anti-elite and exclusionary appeals as well as references to 'the people'.

As for the other selected parties, they all belong to the group of empty populism. Za ľudí and SaS cannot be labelled otherwise given their results. Both parties resorted to populism, either thin or thick, very occasionally. On the other hand, SMER-SD made use of mostly anti-media appeals but scored rather poorly in other departments which puts it into the group of empty populism as well.

Analysis

This paper aimed to explore the uncharted territory of Slovak politics and inquire into the differences in populism among the parliamentary parties before the 2020 elections. For this, content analysis, following the method applied by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, was carried out which provided for a solid research ground. This chapter, however, goes beyond the traditional analysis section and offers critical insights into the theoretical framework for the study of populism.

Party analysis

This section provides for the answer to the research question: What are the differences and commonalities among the parliamentary parties in the degree and type of populism?

The first deviation is the striking difference in the degree of populism employed by the analyzed parties. This disparity cuts through the political realm and divides it in half. On one side there is a group of notorious populist parties (Sme Rodina, OĽANO and ĽSNS) that scored high in almost all empirical dimensions, while the other parties (Za ľudí, SMER-SD and SaS) engaged in the populist rhetoric very occasionally. This division goes along the lines of thin populism. Thin populism was utilized predominantly by the opposition parties seeking to garner popular support in order to challenge the contemporary political establishment. There is, however, an evident divide between two types of challenger parties. The notorious populist parties challenged the mainstream in the name of 'the people', they defended the popular will and legitimized their actions through the abstract construction of undivided and homogenous group of 'the people'. The other opposition actors (Za ľudí and SaS) challenged the mainstream as well but did not do so through the construction of the 'volonté general'. Instead, they chose a programmatic approach to politics, which is considered luke-warm for today's public sphere, and focused on proposing solutions based on facts rather than the electorate's feelings. As a result, C. Mudde's argument concerning the populist discourse (prevalence of perceptions over facts) was confirmed.

This divide is well recorded by V. Havlík, M. Nemčok, P. Spáč and J. Zagraban in their paper which was published in November 2020 (The 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia, p. 227). The graph presented in their paper (Appendix 5) is almost identical with the results of this dissertation (Appendix 6). The researchers investigated the position of the parliamentary parties after the 2020 elections according to people-centrism (thin populism) and anti-elite salience (thick anti-elite appeals). This comparison provides for the necessary empirical evidence for the validity of this research. Hence, researching Slovak populism

exclusively on discourse grounds bears similar results as the ideational approach which implies that the theories do not conflict, but complement each other.

Second, the results have shown that parties differ vastly in the type populist appeals they chose to pursue. This finding goes in line with populism's chameleonic nature, as P. Taggart writes (*Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics*, 2002, p. 70). Populist parties always re-shape their appeals in order to fit in the overarching popular trend. The popular trend of the 2020 elections was the one of change, people sought to oust the establishment (led by SMER-SD) and give a chance to the opposition parties, as O. Gyarfášová and P. Učeň write in their recent paper on the topic of post-election party analysis (*Radical Party Politics and Mobilization Against It in the Slovak Parliamentary Elections 2020*, 2020, p. 330). For this, the populist actors (Sme Rodina and OĽANO) positioned themselves as the embodiment of 'the ordinary people', the underdogs, channeling anti-establishment and anti-politics appeals. This approach was chosen pragmatically, because the anti-corruption/anti-establishment appeals were more likely to produce meaningful electoral results given the situation the country found itself in. This approach worked well for both parties as OĽANO won the elections (25%) while Sme Rodina ended up third (8%) (NRSR, 2020). Therefore, both parties employed the populist appeals as the means to power rather than truly protecting the general will. Using the division introduced by G. Mesežnikov, the parties could be labelled as soft-populists.

The same analysis is applicable to both ĽSNS and SMER-SD. ĽSNS positioned itself in its discourse as the redeemer of the ordinary Slovak people who have fallen victim to capitalism as well as the period of democratic transition. For this, ĽSNS made use of anti-systemic and exclusionary appeals that provided for a hegemony within the anti-systemic camp and allowed for an effective mobilization, as O. Gyarfášová and P. Učeň write (*Radical Party Politics and Mobilization Against It in the Slovak Parliamentary Elections 2020*, 2020, p. 334).

Furthermore, ĽSNS is the only party that incorporates multiple concepts from the writings of P. Taggart. The party, besides being remarkably fixated onto its leader Kotleba, used more references to the 'heartland' than any other party. In addition to this, ĽSNS, in accordance with the other parties, revisited and adjusted its appeals according to the popular trend, from exclusionary towards anti-system and anti-establishment. This shift occurred, because there was no imminent threat from which the exclusionary appeals could gain political capital. This evidence confirms P. Taggart's theory of populism's performance during the times of an imminent crisis (*Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe*,

2004, p. 275). While O. Gyarfášová and P. Učeň confirm this in their paper, they broaden the scope of ĽSNS's appeals to social conservatism and socio-economic issues (Radical Party Politics and Mobilization Against It in the Slovak Parliamentary Elections 2020, 2020, p. 333). On the other hand, SMER-SD utilized only anti-media and exclusionary appeals as they were the only viable options, according to the framework chosen, for an incumbent party. Although this research focuses exclusively on the pre-election appeals, it would be a pity not to mention that the defeat SMER-SD suffered made the party re-shape its appeals. As of December 2020, SMER-SD relies mostly on anti-establishment and anti-systemic appeals, which provides for yet another empirical proof of the chameleonic nature of populism.

The third difference is the bold deviation between ĽSNS and the other parties within the field of exclusionary appeals. The Slovak society is fairly homogenous in terms of race, ethnicity and religion. For this, exclusionary appeals appear only very occasionally, especially during times of crisis such as the European migration crisis of 2015/16, and are frowned upon. There is, however, a specific segment of society that targets the Roma minority. ĽSNS catered to this group in its discourse, according to the results, and thus further exacerbated the problem of their exclusion. This is in line with M. Rossi's analysis of ĽSNS after the 2020 elections (Slovakia after Fico: Systemic Change or More of the Same?, 2020, p. 250). The other analyzed parties do not dare to cross the line of political correctness and publicly shame, criticize and exclude segments of society along their characteristics features. This approach to politics effectively marginalizes ĽSNS as any cooperation between any party and ĽSNS results in instant political death.

Finally, the last interparty disparity is the shift of the 'popular redeemer in the government' label from SMER-SD to Sme Rodina. According to the experts, SMER-SD had always been perceived as the savior of 'the people' but lost its unique trademark due to the poor governance performance from 2012 to 2020 (Mesežnikov, Populism in Slovakia, 2020) (Učeň, Populism in Slovakia, 2020). The content analysis results demonstrate that SMER-SD is no longer trying to persuade a range of potential voters but focuses rather on its core voters groups (retirees and uneducated workers). On the other hand, Sme Rodina pursues discourse strategies addressing 'the people' regardless of their demographic or socio-economic status. Sme Rodina took the 'social' from SMER-SD's appeals and positioned itself as the newly established and genuine protector of the 'volonté general'.

Theory Revision

The theoretical framework, following J. Jagers and S. Walgrave's method, seems to produce thought-provoking results. However as mentioned in the introduction, this theoretical approach is built around

components of the western political realm which effectively precludes the research on populism in the CEE countries to take a more authentic and accurate approach.

The first obstacle of the theory proposed by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave is that it automatically perceives the populist parties as marginalized political pariahs that are neither able to form a coalition nor get a strong mandate. However, the populist parties within the CEE function as C. Mudde's 'koalitionsfähigkeit', meaning their position to power and establishment needs to be treated on a case by case basis (In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe, 2000, p. 44-45). For this, the theoretical framework slightly disregards the mainstream political parties as the only viable option for such parties are the anti-media appeals. Hence, the study results suggest a review of the theoretical framework when it comes to its application outside the Western-European bubble. In order to accommodate the elements of the CEE political domain, the framework needs to provide for more (in number) empirically measurable dimensions for the incumbent mainstream political parties. In addition to this, the analyzed dimensions are of a strictly western nature as they do not reflect the prevailing appeals utilized within the CEE countries. Here the results indicate that the populist appeals focusing on governmental accountability and financial transparency, as proposed by P. Učeň, might provide for an example of yet another empirical dimension suitable for content analysis (Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe, 2007, p. 50).

Secondly, the theory highlights the importance of exclusionary appeals excessively. This approach to the study of populism is well substantiated by the intra-societal variety in terms of demography (religion, race, ethnicity etc.) in Belgium and other Western-European countries. In contrast, the societies of the CEE are generally conservative and relatively homogenous, meaning that the minorities living within such countries are marginal. In order to adapt the theory to the CEE environment, this paper proposes to either assign more weight to the anti-establishment appeals or provide for a broader, more abstract, version of the exclusionary appeals. In this fashion, the framework would be able to include sentences that do not necessarily meet the exclusionary requirements now. For example, it is a tradition for the Slovak anti-systemic camp to condemn financial groups, but are those appeals exclusionary or anti-establishment? Hence, an adapted version of the exclusionary appeals would provide for the much needed clarity for the study of populism within the CEE countries.

Finally, the theoretical framework does not account for non-populist parties. This is reflected in the case of SaS and Za ľudí, for example. Although this problem was already addressed by C. Reinemann, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, J. Strömbäck and C.H. de Vreese, this research confirms the validity of the claim also in the countries of the CEE. Moreover, the results authenticate the findings concerning the populist discourse presented by the aforementioned group. The Slovak populist appeals feature a “narrative of crisis, tabloid-like style, rhetorical features such as colloquial and emotion language” (Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects, 2017, p. 14). Thus, it is clear that an accurate and well-founded study of populism in Slovakia is not possible without a revision, and further adaptation, of the J. Jagers and S. Walgrave’s method. The alteration of the theoretical framework would accommodate the components of the CEE political realm, namely the position to power of the mainstream political parties, empirical dimensions of populist discourse and the revision of the exclusionary appeals.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to inquire into the differences and commonalities in populism among the contemporary parliamentary political parties in Slovakia before the general elections in February 2020. The underlying goal of this paper was to conceptualize a new approach to the study of populism for the case of Slovakia as there has been little to no research conducted on this topic in recent years.

Even though this study drew primarily upon the theory of populism as a form of political communication, it is worth noting the importance of concepts introduced by other theoreticians, namely C. Mudde and P. Taggart. The writings of the aforementioned authors offered valuable insights for the process of decoding the speeches, and hence should be taken into account for any further research on the topic of populism within the CEE countries. In addition to this, the results validate the use of content analysis as a suitable methodological tool for assessing the degree and type of populism within political parties.

The result section clearly illustrates the clear cut across the political spectrum as for the parties utilizing a populist discourse, but it also brings attention to the particular appeals the parties used. Three parties, Sme Rodina, OĽANO and ĽSNS, were classified as populist parties, while SaS, Za ľudí and SMER-SD were labelled as empty populists. As for the types of appeals channeled, the vast majority of appeals was of anti-establishment and anti-elite nature. Quite surprisingly, political parties did not resort to exclusionary and anti-media appeals with the exception of ĽSNS and SMER-SD respectively. This approach, although providing new insights into the topic of Slovak populism, requires a substantial revision and adaption to the political climate of the CEE countries.

Based on these conclusions, researchers should consider creating a more nuanced conceptualization of populism as a communication style. In addition to this, further investigation into the degree and type of populism should be accompanied by a methodological tool that combines the western theoretical understanding of populism but builds on the political components of the CEE countries. Finally, to better understand the implications of these results, future studies could address the conceptualization of other political communication styles in order to provide for a comparative environment.

Appendices

Appendix 1. A coding sheet, adapted from A. Segerström (Possibly Performative Populism Within the Sweden Democrats A Content Analysis of the Speeches of Jimmie Åkesson, 2018).

<p>Populist style:</p> <p>An appeal featuring ‘the people’ whilst highlighting one of the thick-populism features (anti-state / anti-politics or anti-media). Moreover, the speaker positions himself as a defendant of ‘volonté general’ and justifies his claim upon such a defense.</p> <p>The speech features a narrative of crisis, tabloid-like style, rhetorical features such as colloquial and emotion language (C. Reinemann, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, J. Strömbäck and C.H. de Vreese, Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects, 2017, p. 14).</p>	<p>Other styles:</p> <p>Any other appeal featuring a clear divide between the politicians and the people. Such appeals feature signs of expertise and technocracy.</p> <p>The language is often plain, non-emotional and implies gradual change in accordance with the already established standards.</p> <p>The approach of politicians using non-populist style might sometimes be labelled as luke-warm, consensus-seeking and cold.</p>	
<p>General coding principles:</p> <p>This content analysis focuses on quantifying the speeches of politicians. The unit of analysis is a sentence. Each indication of a populist style is counted regardless the number of repetitions. The content analysis was done by hand, and hence no software was used. For this, the analysis includes a particular level of qualitative approach to coding.</p>		
<p>Operationalization</p>		
<p>Category</p>	<p>Description / coding instructions</p>	<p>Examples</p>

Thin-populism	<p>Denotes simple references to ‘the people’. Here it is possible to distinguish between two types of thin-populist appeals:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Direct: the people, the voter, the consumer, the population, the citizens, the nation, we etc. 2. Indirect: democracy, elections, sovereignty, freedom, they, betrayal, defending interests of.. etc. 	<p>We are fighting for the ordinary Slovak people.</p> <p>Translation to Slovak: ‘Bojujeme za obyčajných Slovenských občanov.’</p>
Thick-populism – Anti-establishment	<p>The anti-establishment appeals feature a more ‘anti-systemic’ approach to doing politics. The appeals hence include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single failure • Systematic failure • Public service should be abolished • All public services are criticized • The system is criticized 	<p>The healthcare does not work for the Slovak people.</p> <p>Translation: ‘Slovenské zdravotníctvo nefunguje pre občanov Slovenska.’</p>
Thick-populism – Anti-politics	<p>The anti-politics appeals contain what other theoreticians might call as anti-elite appeals. For this, the sentence will be considered a populist if containing one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy measure or present situation • Policy • Politician • Party • Group of parties • All parties • The system is criticized 	<p>I do not want to terrify or scare people, but when Mr. Drucker (SMER-SD) was the minister of health, it was a total disaster(chaos).</p> <p>Translation: ‘To bol totalny chaos, nechcem strašit ludi ale vtedy bol minister zdravotnictva pan minister drucker a tito pani nam vladli ale to bol totalny chaos.’</p>

Thick-populism – Anti-media	<p>The anti-media appeals follow a very strict code; it is always a critique. For this, the appeals include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One media outlet is criticized • A group media outlets is criticized • All media (the media) are criticized 	<p>This only confirms where we are today. The media have double standard, towards us everything, towards others nothing.</p> <p>Translation: 'To len potvrdzuje to, kde sa dnes nachádzame. Tie médiá hrajú dvojaký meter voči nám všetko, voči iným nič.'</p>
Typology: Anti-elite populism	<p>A party is labelled as an anti-elite populist party if the majority of thin + thick appeals are of anti-elite nature.</p>	<p>This is Slovakia, this is the result of SMER's government. They allowed financial groups to funnel/steal 400 mil euros to cyprus, where we had the press conference with the mailboxes, without any taxation whatsoever and then every years 5000 people die here from preventable deaths.</p> <p>Translatio: 'No to je Slovensko, to je výsledok vladnej strany smer, dovolia finančným skupinám aby vytunelovali 400 mil EUR na Cyprus tam kde sme mali tu tlačovku pri tých schránkach bez akéhokoľvek zdanenia a potom každý rok zomiera úplne zbytočne 5000 ľudí na odvrátiteľne úmrtia.'</p>

Typology: Exclusionary populism	A party is labelled as an exclusionary populist party if the majority of thin + thick appeals are of exclusionary nature.	<p>We, already today, criticize quite harshly the private insurance companies that benefit greatly from the patients, they make huge profits on patients and they perceive them as only numbers...</p> <p>Translation: 'My už dnes veľmi tvrdo kritizujeme že súkromne zdravotné poisťovne si robia ťažký biznis v zdravotníctve, robia si ťažké zisky na pacientoch, z pacientov sa stavajú čísla, stávajú sa z nich iba nejaké...'</p>
Typology: empty	A party is labelled as an empty populist party (no populist) if the majority of thin + thick appeals are of empty, meaning that the discourse features mostly thin-populism and resorts to thick-populism very occasionally.	<p>We need to help/support young families, flats for rent, places in kindergarten and of course, tax the illegal property of mafia and thieves.</p> <p>Translation: 'Potrebujeme posilniť mladé rodiny, pomôcť mladým rodinám, najomné byty, miesta v škôlkach a pravdaže zdaniť nelegálny majetok gaunerov mafiánov a zlodejov.'</p>
Typology: complete populism	A party is labelled as a complete populist party if its discourse features the references to 'the people', exclusionary and anti-elite appeals.	

Coding Results

	OĽANO	ĽSNS	Za ľudí	Sme Rodina	SMER-SD	SaS
Thin-populism	59	32	27	67	26	12
Anti-politics	29	11	18	36	5	10
Anti-state	3	16	0	9	1	0
Anti-establishment	32	27	18	45	16	10
Exclusionary appeals	4	17	2	0	7	3
Anti-elite	15	24	6	24	12	13
Empty	28	4	20	41	15	0

Number of coded sentences

	OĽANO	ĽSNS	Za ľudí	Sme Rodina	SMER-SD	SaS
Sentences	414	185	316	374	371	332

Appendix 2. A consent form signed by G. Mesežnikov.

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

- 1) Research Project Title: Dissertation - the study of populism in Slovakia
- 2) Project Description (1 paragraph)

The aim of this project is to reveal paradigms of populist political communication within the context of Slovak politics. The dissertation focuses on the six parliamentary parties and performs a content analysis with acceptance of both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, the paper's objective is to answer the research question: "What are the differences and commonalities in the degree of populism among the political parties in the Slovak parliament, using the theory of political communication?".

If you agree to take part in this study please read the following statement and sign this form. I am 16 years of age or older.

I can confirm that I have read and understood the description and aims of this research. The researcher has answered all the questions that I had to my satisfaction.

I agree to the audio recording of my interview with the researcher.

I understand that the researcher offers me the following guarantees:

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence. My name will not be used in the study unless I give permission for it.

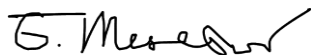
Recordings will be accessible only by the researcher. Unless otherwise agreed, anonymity will be ensured at all times. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.

I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and anything to be deleted from it.

I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: PhDr. Grigorij Mesežnikov

Signature:



Date: 25/11/2020

Appendix 3. A consent form signed by P. Učeň

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

- 1) Research Project Title: Dissertation - the study of populism in Slovakia
- 2) Project Description (1 paragraph)

The aim of this project is to reveal paradigms of populist political communication within the context of Slovak politics. The dissertation focuses on the six parliamentary parties and performs a content analysis with acceptance of both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, the paper's objective is to answer the research question: "What are the differences and commonalities in the degree of populism among the political parties in the Slovak parliament, using the theory of political communication?".

If you agree to take part in this study please read the following statement and

sign this form. I am 16 years of age or older.

I can confirm that I have read and understood the description and aims of this research. The researcher has answered all the questions that I had to my satisfaction.

I agree to the audio recording of my interview with the researcher.

I understand that the researcher offers me the following guarantees:

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence. My name will not be used in the study unless I give permission for it.

Recordings will be accessible only by the researcher. Unless otherwise agreed, anonymity will be ensured at all times. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.

I can ask for the recording to be stopped at any time and anything to be deleted from it.

I consent to take part in the research on the basis of the guarantees outlined above.

Name: *PETER UČEŇ*

Signature: *Peter Učeň*

Date: 05/11/2020

Appendix 4. A student ethics form signed by the supervisor**European Studies Student Ethics Form**

Your name: Jakub Rybníkář

Supervisor: Andreas Funk

Instructions: Before completing this form you should read the APA Ethics Code (<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>). If you are planning research with human subjects, you should also look at the sample consent form available in the Final Project and Dissertation Guide.

- a. Read section 2 that your supervisor will have to sign. Make sure that you cover all these issues in section 1.
- b. Complete section 1 and, if you are using human subjects, section 2, of this form, and sign it.
- c. Ask your project supervisor to read these sections (and the draft consent form if you have one) and ask him/her to sign the form.
- d. Always append this signed form as an appendix to your dissertation. This is a knock-out criterium; if not included the Final Project/Dissertation is awarded an NVD.

Section 1. Project Outline (to be completed by student)

Title of Project: Dissertation - populism research in Slovakia

Aims of project:

The aim of this project is to reveal paradigms of populist political communication within the context of Slovak politics. The dissertation focuses on the six parliamentary parties and performs a discourse content analysis with acceptance of both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, the paper's objective is to answer the research question: "What are the differences and commonalities in the degree of populism among the political parties in the Slovak parliament, using the theory of political communication?"

Will you involve other people in your project – e.g. via formal or informal interviews, group discussions, questionnaires, internet surveys etc. (Note: if you are using data that has already been collected by

another researcher – e.g. recordings or transcripts of conversations given to you by your supervisor, you should answer ‘NO’ to this question.)

Yes ☐

If yes: you should complete the section 2 of this form.

Section 2 Complete this section only if you answered YES to question (iii) above.

(i)What will the participants have to do? (v. brief outline of procedure):

The research aims to conduct an unstructured informal interview with two leading researchers on the topic of Slovak populism. The interview will be held through an online video-conference application (Skype). The participants will have to answer a set of questions prepared beforehand which will be followed by a discussion. The questions will be shared 2 week prior the interview in order to give the interviewees enough to prepare adequately. The interviews will take from 30 to 60 minutes.

(ii)What sort of people will the participants be and how will they be recruited?

The interviewees are two leading scholars on the topic of Slovak populism - Peter Učeň and Grigorij Mesežnikov. They have been invited through email communication.

(iii)What sort of stimuli or materials will your participants be exposed to? Tick the appropriate boxes and then state what they are in the space below

Questionnaires

Pictures

Sounds

Words

Other ✓ - unstructured informal interview

(iv) Consent:

Informed consent must be obtained for all participants before they take part in your project. By means of an informed consent form you should state what participants will be doing, drawing attention to anything they could conceivably object to subsequently. You should also state how they can withdraw from the study at any time and the measures you are taking to ensure the confidentiality of data. A standard informed consent form is available in the Dissertation Manual. Appendix the Informed Consent Form to your Final Project/Dissertation as well.

(vi) What procedures will you follow in order to guarantee the confidentiality of participants' data?

The participants have chosen to communicate through Zoom, which is a reliable verified company. Zoom guarantees confidentiality of its calls. Furthermore, the participants data (personal details and the interview recording) will be encoded using NordLocker and saved at cloud. The participant's name and other details will not be used in the research unless a consent is given. The access to the recording will be limited to only the researcher and supervisor in a case of necessity.

Student's signature:

Date 30/10/2020

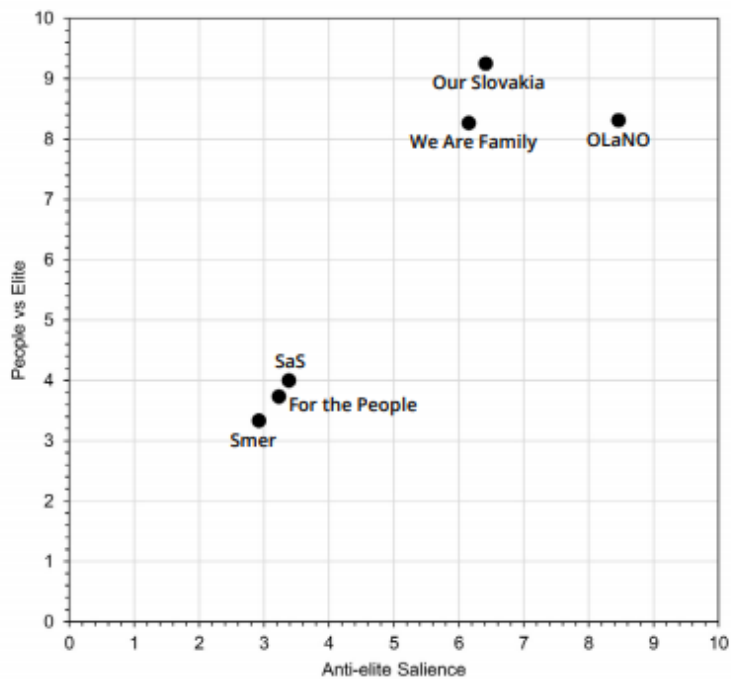
Supervisor's signature:

Date 02/11/2020

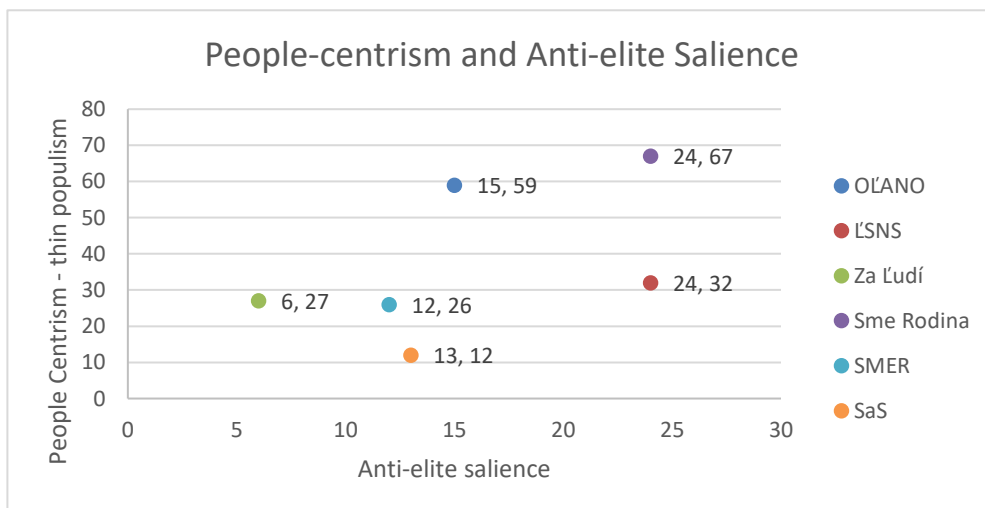
(if satisfied with the proposed procedures)

Appendix 5. Reproduced from V. Havlík, M. Nemčok, P. Spáč and J. Zagraban using data set from 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (The 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia, 2020, s. 227) (Bakker, a iní, 2020).

Translation: ĽSNS = Our Slovakia
 Za ľudí = For the People
 Sme Rodina = We are Family



Appendix 6. Graph on people-centrism and anti-elite salience.



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