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We hate them all? Issue adaptation of extreme right parties in Slovakia 1993–2016

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ABSTRACT

This article presents electoral developments and mobilization issues of the extreme right political parties between 1993 and 2016. It analyzes the changes in the extreme right discourses and framing strategies in relation to their electoral results. We argue that during the transition to democracy in the 1990s and partially later in the 2000s, the extreme right parties were predominantly focusing on the issues related to national sovereignty and were successful mostly in the context of hostility against groups that could potentially threaten this independence, while their electoral achievements were affected mainly by their internal party stability. In the late 2000s, the extreme right has, however, begun to adopt a strategy that has bridged nationalist, populist and xenophobic discourses, with stronger success during the economic and refugee crises in Europe.

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1. Introduction

The political parties on Slovakia's extreme right were part of a broader political current that began to form in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after 1989. Present-day extreme right in Europe is a phenomenon that has in post-war Western societies undergone several phases of renewal as a consequence of modernization (Ignazi, 1992; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995) and in CEE appeared as newly constituted forms after the regime change (Minkenberg, 2011). Their electoral achievements and mobilization activities during the past decades in a number of countries have resulted in the growth of the extreme right, which supports an exclusive conception of citizenship bridged with populist discourse, attracting supporters in both national and European parliament elections (Caiani et al., 2012). Though the extreme right groups usually formally abide by the democratic rules, they have often directly or indirectly criticized the basic rights and have been products and agents of some major changes in European politics over the last decades (Art, 2011). The extreme right has been particularly successful in putting frames on the agenda in relation to issues such as migration, integration, minority issues, or national identity, presenting themselves as defenders of the interests of ordinary people (Betz and Johnson, 2004).

In Slovakia, the extreme right, it has been observed, is relatively successful and dynamic, especially at the level of political parties¹ (Mareš, 2011; Smolík, 2013). They range from parties established in mainstream politics² (for example, Slovak National Party, SNS) and their split-off parties (Real Slovak National Party, PSNS) to marginal parties that have occupied non-

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¹ Although the contemporary extreme right mobilization takes various forms and involves various organizational actors, from registered political parties to individual subcultures (Mareš, 2003), this paper narrows the focus to political parties.

² The list with the names of the parties with acronyms is placed at the end of the text.

parliamentary spectrum since the 1990s (Slovak People's Party, SL'S; Slovak National Unity, SNJ) and more recent (Nation and Justice, NaS) or radical counterparts (Slovak Togetherness – National Party, SP-NS; Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia, L'SNS³). Among these extreme right groups, which we also follow in the paper, the SNS has been electorally the most successful and politically long-established extreme right party, while the movement-party⁴ L'SNS was the most successful in mobilization of local appeals and has recently managed to make a major breakthrough at both regional and national political levels.

The dynamism of the extreme right in Slovakia manifests itself in the ability to raise special issues and relay them to potential voters. These mobilizing issues have changed in the course of more than two decades and their appeal could be ascribed to: political context, including political and economic transformation after regime change, macroeconomic factors; real-world developments and key-events, such as immigration, accession to the European Union [EU] and Eurozone, the economic and refugee crises; public attitudes towards ethnic minorities and tolerance towards xenophobic ideas; or internal processes within the extreme right parties. In this context, we ask what changes occurred in these mobilization issues over the last two decades and how have these changes related to their electoral (mis)fortunes?

The main aim of this exploratory study is thus to overview the discourse and framing strategies of the extreme right political parties in Slovakia in relation to their electoral fortunes from 1993 to 2016. We argue that after the fall of communism, the extreme right parties focused mostly on issues related to the establishment of independent Slovakia and later on issues of national sovereignty and were successful mainly against the factors they considered as threatening to this independence. However, later these parties have gone over to strategy bridging nationalistic, populist and xenophobic frames, with increasing electoral results, especially after the favorable opportunities have opened up to them. Several downturns in electoral gains were caused mainly by extreme right party internal problems and strong disagreements in the leadership. This suggests that there exists a demand for the extreme right ideology in Slovak society, and the extreme right has been able through strategic framing mobilize the potential voters.

Acknowledging the on-going academic discussion about the terminological and ideological conceptualization of this party family,⁵ in the paper we follow the term “extreme right” as widely used and suited term for such political formations in Europe (Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Mudde, 2000; Caiani et al., 2012) and the ideological conceptualization by Mudde (2007), defined by three core features: nativism (nationalistic and xenophobic positions), authoritarianism (a belief in a strictly ordered society), and populism (the wisdom of an “ordinary man”). The aim of this paper is driven by the somewhat lack of academic research on the extreme right in Slovakia. In general, the research on Central and Eastern European extreme right parties in comparison to Western Europe lacks systematic approach. This is true especially for the research on the right-wing extremism in Slovakia. This paper therefore sheds some light on actors and mobilization of the Slovak extreme right and makes a contribution to the overview of the state of the extreme right in the region of CEE.

In what follows, we firstly present the political and economic context, in which the extreme right parties in CEE formed and developed. In the next parts, we show the electoral results of the extreme right political parties in Slovakia over 20 years at local, regional, national, and European levels and continue by analyzing the development of extreme right mobilization issues over time. In the concluding section, we summarize the main arguments and discuss their implications.

2. Formation and early development of the extreme right in CEE: the context

The end of communism in CEE offered an opportunity for institutional redesign, which was affected by the aim to build democratic states and join the EU (Malová and Haughton, 2002). CEE after 1989 underwent a complex process of simultaneous political, economic and social transformation, accompanied by the consolidation of democracy, liberalization and nation-building. The transformations shocked population accustomed to state-guaranteed security and resulted in a high degree of discontent, social disorientation and ambivalence towards the new social order (Beichelt and Minkenberg, 2002). These processes were accompanied by formation of new cleavages focused on citizenship, ethnicity or relations between the state and Church (Pirro, 2014a). During the first two post-communist decades, the bases of political competition had shifted and turned largely about two axis of competition: the role of national identity⁶ (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2012) and the role of the market, while the dominant questions were those of statehood, nationalism and democracy (Rybář, 2007). As this provided various opportunities for extreme right parties to emerge, they were considered to be a product of the political, economic and socio-cultural changes (Beichelt and Minkenberg, 2002; Anastasakis, 2001), magnified in the CEE countries by rise of nationalism, corruption, and perceived moral decadency (Mareš, 2008; Pirro, 2014b). In other words, the extreme right

³ Until November 2015, the party used the name People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS).

⁴ Though the political group, it is officially registered as a 'political party'. The parties, that lack extensive party organization and tend to behave as social movements, are often referred to as “movement parties” (Gunther and Diamond, 2003).

⁵ The origin of the concept of right-wing extremism can be found in the study of fascism and until the 1980s the term extreme right was synonymous with that of neo-fascism (Ignazi, 2003). However, as new parties emerged and older ones innovated themselves without an explicit link to the tradition of fascism, different terms such as extreme right, far right, right-wing extremist, radical right, populist radical right, anti-immigrant, ultra-nationalist and others eroded and some of them have often been used interchangeably.

⁶ Slovakia therefore during the 1990s belonged to the group of European states, in which socio-economic issues did not structure political competition (Rybář, 2007), but the politics was rather dominated by questions of the character of the political regime, the purpose of economic reform, nationalism (the national question) and the role of religion in public life (Deegan-Krause, 2006; Haughton and Rybář, 2008).

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