

# ESSAY

## EXTREMISM IN SLOVAKIA – THROUGHOUT ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

Political extremism has its wider historical and social context. There are multiple factors that contribute to the rise and the spread of extremism and political radicalism in various countries. The paper describes the situation of extremism in Slovakia, with a special focus on the recent happenings connected with the far-right party of Marián Kotleba – People’s Party – Our Slovakia. The author tries to find answers to the issue, why extremist tendencies are so „in“ and popular among today’s young generation.

**Key words:** *extremism, radicalism, young people, human rights, democracy*

### INTRODUCTION

Activities of nationalist, populist, xenophobic and extremist forces in any country should be considered in their authentic context. In Western Europe the influx of high number of immigrants from the countries with different cultural and confessional background and the difficulties that have accompanied migrants’ intergration into the „majority“ society provoked strong anti-immigrant feelings on the side of some segments of local population. Xenophobic and isolationist political forces are trying to strengthen themselves politically and electorally on the wave of these feelings. In Central and Eastern Europe, however one can identify some other reasons behind activities of the populist, nationalist or openly extremist groupings. Immediately after the fall of communism, the newly restored free socio-political discourse included representatives of an opinion stream that in various proportions combined ethnic nationalism, historical revisionism, xenophobia, non-liberal

concepts of power execution, anti-minority sentiments etc. Some of them tried to be incorporated into the regular political system and portray themselves as genuine upholders of „national patriotism“. Their activities were more or less on the border between the official landscape and the „forbidden area“, in some kind of grey zone. They used the existing legislative framework to found civil associations or political parties to advertise their views and concepts, very often in contrast with the basic democratic and human rights principles. Their members and supporters have been using radical and extremist methods, such as intimidation, violence and physical assaults on members of ethnic, racial or religious minorities, foreigners, proponents of another ideologies [Mesežnikov, 2015: 137].

Radicalization especially of young people, further aggravation of violence and terrorist attacks are only some demonstrations of growing loss of trust to state authorities and politics, caused mainly by the financial and migration crisis in Europe. Right-wing and anti-immigrant parties have been on the rise across Europe after years of slow economic growth and the arrival of more than a million migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa. These factors encouraging extremism and radicalism are present not only in Slovakia, but elsewhere in Europe.

There are three successful extreme right parties gaining seats in national parliaments of an EU member state, after Greece's Golden Dawn, Hungarian Jobbik, it is the People's Party –Our Slovakia led by Marián Kotleba [Nociar, 2017]. The far right tendencies connected with Freedom & Direct Democracy Party of Tomio Okamura have also won in the Czech elections in October 2017.

## **1. SITUATION IN SLOVAKIA**

In Slovakia there exists a set of social pre-conditions that creates the context of activities of the extreme right.

The social transformation following the fall of communism caused dramatic changes in society's development, it changed the social status and living conditions of large groups of population and led to different reactions, ranging from endorsement and active support through passive acceptance to overt opposition and protest. In this situation the nationalism serves as a tool for mobilization, as an opportunity to recruit new members, to penetrate into sociodemographic groups more deeply or to organise their activities in those locations where social problems are caused by the transition process or by the combination of newly-emerged and/or old but longlasting negligency of the bad situation.

In 2006-2010, during the government of Direction–Social Democracy (Smer-SD), Slovak National Party (SNS) and Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), in many cases the police in Slovakia was inactive against extremist activities, starting to act only after criminal acts were committed and aftermath publicized by media. Extremists, feeling the evident decline in police commitment to fight extremism and to protect its possible targets started organizing public events, manifestations and concerts of neo-Nazi rock-groups. Under the pressure of NGOs and independent media the police conducted several spectacular actions against extremists, however, without serious legal consequences. It encouraged the extremists to be even more active. In 2006-2010, country's strong nationalist public and political discourse, as well as the government doctrine of boosting „Slovak patriotism“ played in favour of

extremists and radical nationalists, giving them opportunity to present themselves as the authentic part of the „patriotic“ trend [Mesežnikov, 2015: 140].

In 2010 the centre-right coalition government formed by the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ-DS), Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and Bridge (Most – Híd), led by Iveta Radičová, included provisions on necessity to intensify the fights against extremism into its program manifesto. By doing so the government recognised the importance of this issue. In March 2012 Iveta Radičová’s multiple cabinet was replaced after early elections by single-party government of Smer-SD, led by Róbert Fico [Ibid.: 140 – 141].

There is a today’s ruling coalition of Smer-SD, Slovak National Party (SNS), Most-Híd, and Siet’. Most-Híd and Siet’ explained their decision to join the government with Smer - SD and the Slovak National Party (SNS) to “build a dam against extremism”. Observers label this the *raison d’être* of the current government, as extremists tendencies are increasing. According to the latest polls, if the elections were held now, the extremists would reach 10% [Focus polling agency, 2017].

### **Kotleba’s path to the Parliament**

The first Kotleba’s party Slovak Community (Slovenská pospolitost) was banned by the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic in 2006. The manifesto of this party had proposed the abolition of the democratic system and establishment of „class state based on national, Christian and social principles“. It was for the first time after 1989, that a political party was banned.

The extremist and revisionist party People’s Party – Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana - Naše Slovensko, hereinafter referred as „LSNS“) was created in 2010 as a direct successor to the Kotleba’s former political project. The party ran in two recent parliamentary election (in 2010 and 2012). However the party failed to overcome 5% threshold to qualify into the Parliament as well as to overcome 3% - threshold for getting money from the state budget for reimbursement of expenses for participation in elections.

In 2013 Kotleba surprisingly won the second round of regional elections in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region in central Slovakia. He became the first elected regional chairman with a neo-Nazi background.

In general elections in 2016 the Kotleba’s party suddenly gained 8% of the vote nationwide, that means 14 seats in the 150-seat national parliament. To compare the party received only 1,6% of the popular vote in the previous general elections. Besides that a very alarming issue is the fact, that 23% of first-time voters (aged 18-22) decided for extremist ideology!

## **2. CAUSES FOR RISING EXTREMISM AND POLITICAL RADICALISM**

How is it possible, that today’s young people, who live in democracy, who never experienced a totalitarian regime and who are able to enjoy all the benefits of open borders, voluntarily decide for anti-democratic political forces whose programmes and activities contradict the basic principles of liberal democracy?

## **2.1. Insufficiencies in Human Rights Education**

In post – communist Slovakia the attitude to Dr. Jozef Tiso and the Slovak Republic 1939-1945 was shaped shortly after the fall of communism. As a result of the earlier taboo of the period by communist historians, this controversial subject was uncritically idealised in early stages after 1989. Before the public was even able to learn about the objective historical truth of the 1930s and 1940s, this period began to be celebrated [Mesežnikov, 2015: 126].

Any discussion with young people, their radicalization, and their electoral preferences for the extreme right must begin with education. The poor and steadily deteriorating standard of the Slovak education has been regularly documented by the comparative PISA surveys (The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training). In addition to the parameters of the OECD the Slovak students have demonstrated extremely poor knowledge of national history, with especially poor knowledge of the history of the wartime Slovak Republic, a Nazi Germany vassal state that deported thousands of its Jewish citizens to extermination camps (OECD 2014). Moreover, present-day high school students know very little about the 40 years of communism and are not taught very much about the Velvet Revolution of 1989 either. As some sociologists emphasise that a weak historical awareness provides a fertile soil for extremism, with young people falling for the appealing lure of extremist, fascist-leaning ideologies and populist ideas proposing simplistic solutions to society's most complex problems. From this it is only a short step to creating the image of an enemy [Gyárfašová 2017].

## **2.2. Mobilisation of Youth**

The members of extremist groupings in Slovakia came up recently with the new tactics. They started to communicate directly with their potential supporters in localities organizing public events (rallies, manifestations, marches, pre-election meetings) in reaction to strong disappointment of a substantial portion of local population with social and living conditions and inability of authorities to solve disturbing problems. Clashes between the police and extremists during such public events offered the latter opportunity to propagate their views, presenting themselves as martyrs fighting for „national and social justice“ [Mesežnikov 2015: 139]. According to Gyárfašová, it is no coincidence that the second most frequent reason people gave for voting LSNS in 2016 was its „anti-corruption program“.

The extremist agenda of LSNS has been visible especially in public assessment of World War II, marking the foundation of the Slovak Republic on 14 March or different anniversaries of key politicians and figures of that regime. The influential personalities of the authoritarian Slovak Republic 1939-1945, especially Dr. Jozef Tiso, have become role models for potential first voters in parliamentary elections 2016 who see this period of the Slovak history from a revisionist perspective, despite the fact, that this regime persecuted political opponents, led to restriction of human rights of certain groups of population because of their religion, race or ethnic origin [Mesežnikov 2015: 118].

Members of LSNS usually wear uniforms similar to those of military units of People's Party militia and at the same time they use symbols, flags and uniforms

with slight alteration of colours in order to avoid charges for the promotion of Nazism [Ibid.: 119].

Slovak politicians and the public at large have underestimated the activities and statements of the representatives of ĽSNS, who have been working on mobilisation of especially young people for several years. The party has approached an incredible number of young people.

As a good example serves the fact, that members and supporters of ĽSNS have been often reconstructing castles and taking young people, their siblings and friends with them, where they had many opportunities to agitate for the party's ideology. Simply say, it was a way for manipulating and brainwashing them [The Slovak Spectator, 15 March 2016].

### **2.3. Professionalism of political leadership and political culture**

The case of election of the representatives of the overt political extremism to public office draws an attention of many politicians to the political agenda of Marián Kotleba. Mainstream politicians at first tried to present his election as an act of political delusion. Yet, they themselves attempted to incorporate the extremist agenda using anti-Roma and anti-European sentiments in political campaign and public debate in order to win similar electorate. Thus the elements of extremism became more visible and increasingly present in political discourse.

As Anita Világi from the Comenius University in Bratislava observed, many statements that would previously have been considered unacceptable because they are offensive to some groups or individuals living in the society, are today part of the political debate also among politicians who are not from ĽSNS.

Sixty percent of the people in Slovakia believe that many or all politicians are corrupt. Political corruption, scandals involving politicians, the interconnectedness of political and economic power, and the „oligarchization” of democracy have dominated the headlines over the past few years. Many suspicions have been raised, but the number of prosecutions and convictions has been close to zero. As Gyárfašová stated it is quite natural that in such an atmosphere the public confidence in established institutions and mainstream political parties has declined and a radical party that opposes the system and promises to „stop robbing the state” and „crack down on thieves in suits” is seen as an alternative [Gyárfašová 2017].

Pervasive corruption is not, however, the only failing of the establishment. Statements by government officials and other political actors (with the notable exception of President Andrej Kiska) created a sense of imminent threat especially with regard to the migration crisis.

The professionalism of political leadership in Slovakia is questionable. The entry of ĽSNS to the Parliament has influenced not only the work of the Parliament, but also the general discourse in the country towards the radicals.

### **2.4. New means of communication versus the right to be free from hate crime**

Over the last decade the Internet has become the most efficacious and widely used means of communicating facts, information, feelings, opinions and judgments.

Dissemination of ideas by individuals independently from newspapers, radio and/or television has significantly changed the traditional role of these mass media. Not only have they lost their monopoly on the diffusion of ideas, but they have above all ceased to be a privileged source of information [Zeno- Zenchovich 2008: 99-112].

The Internet has changed the way we communicate. It has many positive values, but it also has allowed offence to be spread to a broader audience without editorial control and often behind a veil of anonymity. The growing reliance on the Internet as the main source of information for many people enables the fast spread of often unverified statements that could also incite to hatred.

Today data can be accessed by anyone, anywhere and at any time. Continued and unrestricted dissemination of intolerant statements on-line, by media and in a political discourse could lead to incitement to discrimination, hatred and violence. Statements posted on-line can go viral almost instantly, making it difficult to challenge them and to remove them completely.

A poll carried out by the Focus agency for the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) think tank in July 2017 on 1,025 respondents older than 18 years of age, shows that 63 percent of the Slovaks are concerned by the spread of hatred and intolerance via social networks and consider it a serious problem in society. Only 5 percent of young people between the ages 18–39 do not follow news of social and political activities on the Internet at all. Although young people frequently encounter hate speech on the Internet, as many as three-quarters admitted that they do not actively respond to haters. Radical content of this nature is clearly spreading without being countered at all (or minimally at best), indeed many young people assume it is part and parcel of the freedom of speech [Institute for Public Affairs, 2017].

LSNS is one of the parties that have employed social media as a powerful vehicle. The only other party with a comparable reach on the Facebook is Richard Sulík's liberal Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), a long-term leader on social media. In response to the block on the satirical fanpage, Zomri (Die) on Facebook, people started to report that the Facebook pages of the Kotleba's LSNS party were in violation of the social network's community guidelines. Facebook reacted by blocking several pages, including the main one Kotleba – LSNS which had almost 81,000 fans [The Slovak Spectator 10 April 2017].

## **CONCLUSION**

There are specific factors encouraging extremist policy that derive from peculiarities of the historical development of Slovakia. They include traditions of authoritarian nationalist policy from the interwar period and ideological heritage of pro-Nazi collaborationist regime that existed in Slovakia during the World War II. The country's multi-ethnic composition of the country's population offers nationalistically oriented forces an opportunity to use the so-called „ethnic card“ for voters' mobilization. Long-term problems associated with the situation of the Roma minority create a breeding ground for anti-Roma racial prejudice and discrimination. These problems serve the extremist groups for justification of their radical stances and proposals gaining a certain support from the part of local population [Mesežnikov 2015: 139].

As sociologists observe, despite the resultant high growth rates, the majority of people in Slovakia do not universally approve of the reforms, because they are associated with a drastic loss of the social security. An economic boom is not always a guarantee of social peace, if this growth is not distributed fairly among citizens. High disappointment and afterwards social revolt is also possible [Hetteš 2013].

People are unsatisfied, frustrated, they just passively accept afforded „manipulated“ information and therefore they welcome single populist slogans of representatives of radical groupings and their „quick and easy“ solutions.

And what is to be done? Without any change in society's general outlook, it is not realistic to expect any change neither in general public nor in political attitudes. Crucial is an adoption of a consistent approach to law violations, adoption and/or amendments of relevant national legislation. The judiciary should contribute to the fight against extremism and radicalism by increasing the enforceability of laws in cases of committing crimes related to racism, extremism and other forms of intolerance.

To raise awareness among the population about the malicious effects of extremism and incitements to hatred, it is necessary to improve the standards of human rights education in schools curricula and to develop public programmes supporting civil society organisations that are active in the fight against extremism and radicalism.

There are already some arrangements and measures in the area of legislation, prosecution and education:

- a) According to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) hate crime reporting, Slovakia regularly reports police data and data on sentencing. The Criminal Code includes substantive offences and a specific penalty-enhancement clause affixed to a large number of base offences. While sentencing data only comprise hate crimes, the police data also include hate speech offences. The Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor's Office collect hate crime data [OSCE-ODIHR 2017].
- b) General Prosecutor Jaromír Čižnár filed the motion with the Supreme Court in May 2017 to dissolve the ĽSNS party. Despite the fact that the party denies any links to fascism or racism, the party's conduct and statements might constitute violations of Slovak law [The Slovak Spectator, 25 May 2017].
- c) The leader of ĽSNS Marián Kotleba has been charged in July 2017 by police with promoting extremist movements. The charges are related to pictures the People's Party posted online in March. Those pictures showed an enlarged copy of a check donated to a charity for disabled children -- for 1,488 euros. The numbers supposedly carry a white-supremacist and pro-Nazi message. The 14 refers to the 14 words in a slogan used by white supremacists: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." The 88 is short for "Heil Hitler" -- "H" is the eighth letter of the alphabet. Kotleba faces a prison sentence of six months to three years. If sentenced, he would also lose his parliamentary mandate [Reuters, 28 July 2017].
- d) In some regions of Slovakia police units launched educative projects in cooperation with NGOs, schools and organs of local and regional self-government. The projects were aimed to increase knowledge about racism and extremism among youth (pupils, students) and teachers, to improve abilities of

policemen and public administrative officials in fighting extremism. However, the tendency to prefer repression to prevention and education still prevails in approach of state organs, including police [Mesežnikov 2015: 141].

- e) Nearly thirty high school students graduated in *Summer School: The Young Against Extremism and Radicalism* in July 2017, that was organised by the Slovak Security Policy Institut with support of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic and by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Banská Štiavnica. The discussions and trainings were focused on the alarming problem of rising extremism and radicalism in Slovakia especially among young people [Slovak Security Police Institut, 2017].
- f) According to the results of the regional election of November 4, 2017, Marián Kotleba will not continue in his office as a chairman of Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region, as he was defeated by an independent candidate Ján Lunter with 84% of votes in the region [The Slovak Spectator 5.11.2017].

Despite the official defeat of Nazism and fascism in Europe after the World War II, it did not, however, automatically warrant the eradication of political radicalism in its extreme nationalist or racist form from the public life in many European countries. The virus of extremism continues to live latently within societies and in times of proper conditions it resurfaces in places. It is exactly the case of Slovakia-therefore it is to be believed that the results of the recent regional elections in November will keep the values of liberal democracy and observance of human rights still alive in the Slovakian society and politics.

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