

# GRIGORIJ MESEŽNIKOV: NATIONAL POPULISM IN SLOVAKIA – DEFINING THE CHARACTER OF THE STATE AND INTERPRETING SELECT HISTORIC EVENTS

## NATIONAL POPULISM AND THE CONTEXT OF ITS EXISTENCE IN SLOVAKIA

In recent years, political players in Slovakia have grown increasingly fond of such patterns of appealing to the electorate that are based on applying populism strategies with strong ethnic-nationalist undertones. This way of addressing voters became typical for the country's political life quite some time ago. Since the 1989 collapse of the communist regime and reinstatement of pluralistic democracy, it has proven to be sufficiently effective and at times brought ample power and political gains to its upholders. The recent revival of national populism is interesting especially because the conditions for its existence are quite different compared to the mid-1990s – they are characterized by generally successful social transformation that helped build foundations of a liberal-democratic regime and achieve the country's integration goals, i.e. its full-fledged membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO).

The term of “national populism” is generally used to describe political activity (in the multitude of its displays) that focuses on addressing voters via traditional populist methods<sup>1</sup> while accentuating strong ethnic-nationalist (‘national’) chords. It applies to a broad spectrum of political players, i.e. not only to supporters of extremist, radical and nationalistic ideas but to all those politicians of various ideological affiliations (including declared ones) whose preferred *modus operandi* combines populist appeal and ethnic nationalism.

It is obvious that the prime mover behind recent activation of national populism forces in Slovakia was the power change that took place after the

2006 parliamentary elections when new government was formed by the coalition of SMER–Social Democracy (SMER-SD) – Slovak National Party (SNS) – People’s Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), i.e. three political subjects that view various elements of national populism as part and parcel of their ideological and political arsenal. These parties’ combined election result and their leaders’ subsequent decision to form a new ruling coalition cannot be perceived outside the context of national populism as a tool of voter mobilization and a cultural and political bond that binds part of Slovakia’s party elite. The working of the national-populism appeal during the period of 2006–2009 has affected the overall atmosphere within society and significantly shaped the environment for mutual interactions between various social groups.

When examining activities of political players that are considered protagonists of national populism in Slovakia, one ought to bear in mind general factors of socio-political as well as historical nature. It was long-term working of these factors that formed the socio-cultural environment in which national populists disseminated their messages and capitalized on people’s response to them. Besides ethnicity-related issues they also included other socio-political factors such as constitutional system Slovakia was part of, types of political regimes in these constitutional systems, the character, course and implications of social changes that occurred during periods of government and societal transformation, the definition of statehood and general pattern of power execution preferred by dominant political forces, etc. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Slovakia formed part of five different constitutional systems: Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovak Republic, wartime Slovak State, restored Czechoslovak Republic and independent Slovak Republic. These systems were home to different political regimes, including monarchist semi-authoritarianism, pluralistic democracy, fascist totalitarianism, restricted ‘national’ democracy, communist totalitarianism and alternate regimes of liberal and non-liberal democracy between 1990 and 2006. Frequent changes in the system of government and political regime within a relatively short historical period have caused a different degree of various population groups’ self-identification with existing and/or obsolete social order, including their self-identification with particular government formations; at the same time, these population groups demonstrated their allegiance to opposing types of political culture (i.e. democratic vs. authoritarian), which immediately influenced their political behaviour as well as political players’ preferred strategies of addressing them.

Following the collapse of communist regime in 1989 and subsequent restoration of democratic regime with all procedural attributes, including

electoral competition, political forces that are viewed as populist based on their internal character, program, values, ideological background and preferred methods of voter mobilization became an important part of the country's party system. Since 1992, these forces have regularly posted solid results in parliamentary elections and – in case of favourable power configuration – formed coalition governments that relied on majority in parliament. Such was the case in 1992 when the HZDS formed a majority crypto-coalition government with the SNS (that turned into overt coalition a year later); in 1994 when early elections brought to power the coalition of HZDS – ZRS – SNS; and finally in 2006 when the incumbent administration was formed by the coalition of SMER-SD – SNS – ĽS-HZDS.

The general approach to power execution may be viewed as the basic criterion to distinguish between different protagonists of populist politics in Slovakia; based on this typology, one may identify 'hard' (authoritarian) and 'soft' (prevalingly non-authoritarian) populism. In early stages of transformation, i.e. before the process of EU integration was launched, Slovakia's political landscape generated the first generation of populist politicians (i.e. 'hard' populists gathered at the time in the HZDS and SNS); the second generation of populists began to emerge during the period of reviving the country's integration ambitions (i.e. between 1998 and 2002) and gained its political foothold immediately before and after Slovakia's EU accession when 'soft' populists (SMER-SD) became a dominant political force.<sup>2</sup> The contemporary period may be characterized by mutual cooperation between both generations and types of populist actors; in 2006, their cooperation was upgraded to the government level.

## PROTAGONISTS OF NATIONAL POPULISM

A typical representative of national populism in Slovakia is the Slovak National Party (SNS). The party was founded in spring 1990 by the means of publicly subscribing to the legacy of the historic SNS; several months later, in the first free parliamentary elections in the country's modern history, it received enough votes to qualify to the national parliament, the Slovak National Council. It has evolved into a relevant political subject and has been represented in parliament ever since 1990, except for the hiatus between 2002 and 2006 when it remained outside the assembly due to an internal rift that led to a defeat in the 2002 elections.

Between 1990 and 1992, the party was the weightiest political representative of Slovak separatism. Relatively soon after it emerged and entered parliament, it began to champion the idea of Slovakia's state sovereignty.

Between 1993 and 1994, between 1994 and 1998 and after the 2006 elections it was part of government, which enabled it to participate in shaping policies in all relevant areas of public life. It is a radical nationalistic force that uses far-right and anti-communist rhetoric. It is a sworn opponent of the concept of civically defined political nation and advocates the concept of ethnic nation. The SNS views the Slovak Republic as a national state of ethnic Slovaks; with respect to ethnic minorities, it promotes the concept of assimilation that manifests primarily – but is not limited to – in *a priori* questioning ethnic Hungarians' loyalty to the Slovak Republic. On the 'theoretical' level, this shows through questioning the fact that ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia are of truly Hungarian origin; in practice, it shows through proposing measures that complicate practical exercise of ethnic Hungarians' rights in the field of political representation, use of language, education, culture, regional development and maintaining ties with Hungary, which ethnic Hungarians consider their motherland in terms of culture and language. In the mid-1990s, the SNS unsuccessfully campaigned to introduce the system of so-called alternative education for children belonging to ethnic minorities. Its practical implementation would have amounted to an irreparable decline in the standard of exercising minority rights with all sorts of political implications.

SNS representatives have become notorious for using confrontational rhetoric and aggressive tone; they regularly utter offensive statements with respect to members of ethnic minorities and their political representatives. The party appeals to people with proclivity to nationalist views and authoritarian concepts of society's political organization.

Another political subject that can be considered a protagonist of national populism in Slovakia is the People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). The party was founded in spring 1991 as a result of internal rift within Public against Violence (VPN), a revolutionary and reformist movement that was the architect of peacefully toppling the communist regime in 1989 and won in the first free parliamentary elections in June 1990. The initiators of the split led by then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar advocated a model of transformation different from the 'federal' model that was implemented in Slovakia between 1990 and 1992 by VPN and its coalition partners. Eventually they founded the HZDS that immediately gained political support, especially among those voters who were disenchanted by the course of the transformation process. Another item on the movement's political agenda and an important factor behind its strong voter support was the issue of dissolving the Czechoslovak Federation. The HZDS profiled itself as the promoter of Slovaks' 'national aspirations' and

proposed solutions to Czechoslovakia's constitutional system that went beyond the framework of the existing federative model. After scoring a resounding success in the 1992 elections, the HZDS became the principal political force behind the 'velvet divorce' in Slovakia; ever since 1993, it has portrayed itself as "the architect of Slovak statehood".

Ever since its emergence, the HZDS presented itself as a "nationally oriented" and "pro-Slovak" political force. In the most flagrant form, its 'national' orientation was furthered by a group of party leaders whose views regarding issues such as interethnic relations, the country's history, the government's character, etc. were not essentially different from those shared by SNS leaders. Between 1992 and 1998, this group of HZDS officials enjoyed the broadest space to pursue their activities and influence the party's actions as well as its program and ideological profile. Between 1994 and 1998, the HZDS was the backbone of the ruling coalition whose authoritarian methods were incompatible with values of liberal democracy, which caused serious democratic deficits in the country's internal development and undermined its integration aspirations. By 1998, though, the nationalist wing began to lose its grip due to gradual electoral and general political debilitation of the HZDS. Eight years in the opposition brought about a dramatic decline in voter support and forced the party to regroup. Eventually, the 'nationally oriented' wing was elbowed out of the party; however, the departure of nationalist leaders and authentic upholders of the 'national' agenda does not mean that the HZDS cannot be considered a party of national populism anymore.

The third important representative of national populism in Slovakia is SMER–Social Democracy (SMER-SD) that declares its social-democratic orientation. The party was founded in 1999 by Robert Fico, former Vice-Chairman of the Party of Democratic Left (SDL) who refused to toe the party line and moved on to fulfil his own political and leadership ambitions.

SMER-SD has covered a remarkable journey since its founding, moving from the initial concept of a "non-ideological party of pragmatic solutions" to a third-way party that according to its leaders amalgamated values of conservatism, social democracy and liberalism (yet later those of "leftists, social democrats and national liberals") and finally to a party with proclaimed social-democratic profile. From the very outset, the nationalist element has been popular among SMER-SD leaders. It has manifested through their adoption of "pro-Slovak" (i.e. pro-national) positions on issues concerning interethnic and international relations, interpretation of various historic events and figures, general perception of society's development after the fall of communism and pursued alliance strategies. When seeking

a viable ideological anchor, party leaders did not hesitate to use nationalist arguments. For instance Boris Zala, former party vice-chairman and one of its principal ideologists wrote in 2002 that the third way concept (i.e. the party's new ideology) according to SMER-SD included a "renewed search for national meaning and historical anchoring of Slovakness".<sup>3</sup>

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

The decision of SMER-SD to form a new administration with the SNS and the LS-HZDS after the 2006 elections was catalyzed primarily by power ambitions. Leaders of SMER-SD tried to justify the decision by the motivation to create favourable conditions for implementation of socio-economic policies based on social-democratic values (e.g. building the welfare state).

According to SMER-SD leaders, the Robert Fico administration pursues social-democratic policies while its coalition partners endorse these policies and even adapt their own priorities to them. In fact, two minor ruling parties actively pursue their own ideas in several areas, which in the case of radically nationalist SNS leads to direct attempts to meddle with the established system of minority rights' implementation, for instance in the field of education and use of native languages. Government participation of the SNS allows its leaders as well as representatives of related opinion streams to take an active part in the public discourse and sway it toward strengthening the concept of ethnic nationalism. This leads to a general change in overall social atmosphere, including the area of interethnic relations.

There was one more relevant subject of the populist type on Slovakia's political scene, namely the Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS) that was part of the ruling coalition between 1994 and 1998. Describing this party as a typical protagonist of national populism would be little far-fetched, mostly because the element of ethnic nationalism was largely absent from its program profile, its voter mobilization strategies and its practical performance. Nevertheless, it was a populist political subject that attracted vot-

ers mostly by emphasizing social issues, opposing systemic changes within society after the fall of communism in general and liberal economic reforms in particular and sharing nostalgia for “socially just” society before November 1989. In terms of orientation the ZRS resembled a far-left organization of the neo-communist type, this despite the absence of references to the communist or Marx-Leninist ideology from its program documents and its leaders’ public statements. Although the ZRS was not a typical national populism subject, its participation in government alongside the HZDS and SNS created favourable conditions for implementation of policies of national populism.

The actual stance of national populists on various types of mutual interactions (i.e. dialogue or conflict) between particular social groups in Slovakia is not only reflected in their positions on issues concerning ethnic minorities (although this is where ethnic nationalism is manifested the most vividly) but also on issues such as understanding the fabric of society, defining the character of the system of government, choosing the concept of nation, tackling the dichotomy of ‘ethnic’ vs. ‘civil’, general harmony between the political creed and liberal-democratic values and interpretation of national history, including perception of particular historical periods, events and figures.

## DEFINING THE CHARACTER OF THE STATE

Between 1994 and 1998, during the reign of ‘hard’ populists from the ruling coalition of HZDS – ZRS – SNS, leading protagonists of national populism strove to emphasize their exceptional role in the process of founding independent Slovakia, a special value of the national state, Slovakia’s state independence as the top social priority, and superiority of interests of government and its institutions over those of individuals. At this point, emergence of the independent Slovak Republic was quite a recent history and the process of building state institutions had not yet been fully completed. The degree of Slovak citizens’ self-identification with their recently-emerged country was relatively low; furthermore, for a significant part of the population the acceptance of former Czechoslovakia’s dissolution was mixed with frustration over their own incapacity to put through a different solution to the constitutional system issue during the period of 1990–1992. These sentiments were multiplied by authoritarian domestic politics of the Vladimír Mečiar administration that inspired anxiety and provoked protests, especially among people professing pro-democratic values. Members of eth-

nic minorities, particularly ethnic Hungarians, were discouraged from endorsing the new country by nationalism that was manifested on the level of state minority policy in the field of education, culture and use of native languages.

The mentioned circumstances and phenomena created within society favourable conditions for emergence and growth of mass displays of disagreement, protests and support for alternative political concepts. Although representatives of then-ruling parties proclaimed their respect for democratic principles and standards, political practice often contradicted these declarations. Symptomatic in this context was their justification of power measures that flew in the face of democratic standards and traditions as well as arguments they used to dismiss criticism (coming both from within and abroad) the Mečiar administration faced for its authoritarian practices.

Ruling politicians tried to raise among citizens a permanent sense of threat to the fundamentals of Slovak statehood; they often put this danger in the context with activities of domestic political opponents, particularly parliamentary opposition and independent media. Relatively shortly after seizing power in the early elections of 1994, the SNS and HZDS came up with an idea of adopting a special act that was supposed to protect state and its institutions as part of the penal law. In fact, it was motivated by the intention to punish citizens who participated in opposition political activities, championed different political concepts including a different understanding of power execution and spread abroad such information on the country's internal development the incumbent administration considered "false" or "untrue". In April 1996, Prime Minister and HZDS Chairman Vladimír Mečiar said in justification of the necessity to pass a "law on the protection of the republic" (an amendment to the Criminal Code) that Slovakia needed such legislation due to "permanent and intensifying assaults on government organs that are designed to bring about their moral and political disintegration and discredit them in the eyes of the public regardless of facts"<sup>4</sup>. The proposed amendment to the Criminal Code even sought to protect the state against opinions ruling parties viewed as "unreasonable" and aimed "against statehood". Parliament Chairman Ivan Gašparovič (HZDS) declared that Slovakia is "truly a small and young state that needs to have certain defence systems in the beginning that would eliminate those not always reasonable opinions of some people who within young Slovakia seek to materialize certain measures that are aimed against statehood of the Slovak Republic"<sup>5</sup>. MP Kamil Haľapka (SNS) seconded this view by saying that his party considered it inevitable to put through such legislative measures that should prevent "displays of bias and questioning of Slovak



statehood, unjustified attacks against emergence and existence of the state, its territorial integrity and democratic constitutional system”.<sup>6</sup>

Representatives of national-populist parties saw threats to Slovak statehood even in attempts to provide critical information on Slovakia’s internal situation abroad. For instance, MP Dušan Slobodník (HZDS) accused domestic political opposition and independent media that their criticism of government, particularly “criticism insidiously communicated abroad is an attempt to destroy Slovak statehood”.<sup>7</sup> SNS Chairman Ján Slota expanded the list of people potentially targeted by the act on the protection of the republic to include representatives of Hungarian political parties in Slovakia and “other high representatives of Slovak politics” who “very often express themselves in a way that has nothing to do with the fact that they would have a positive relation to the state”.<sup>8</sup>

During a party meeting in April 1996, one of HZDS prominent representatives Augustín Marián Húska served a thorough idea about the values on which the HZDS based its activities when building the new state following its emergence in 1993. In his speech, Húska enumerated “seven virtues” of the HZDS that had allegedly predetermined its success in building Slovakia anew. According to him, they included “brilliant improvisation”, “complex providence and program creativity”, “ability to capitalize on intergeneration synergy”, “rootedness in national identity”, “rootedness in spiritual experience”, “ability to forge social solidarity” and “ability to forge Slovakia’s capital-generation layer”. The said list of ‘virtues’ was completely free of any references to values that would indicate orientation on developing the state’s democratic character.

According to Húska, the independent Slovak Republic emerged as an “unwanted child of superpowers” and the West’s criticism of Slovakia’s internal situation had to do with a thousand year-old struggle over the important space in the centre of Europe.<sup>10</sup> HZDS Chairman Mečiar repeatedly called for social unity (“unification”) that according to him entailed “especially acknowledging the basic needs of the nation and state we live in and mutually respecting these interests everywhere”.<sup>11</sup> In 1997, Mečiar said that “state interests prevail over interests of parties, groups and persons; they must be complied with and furthered everywhere in the world”.<sup>12</sup>

The SNS emphasized that Slovakia’s independent statehood should be guided by its own original understanding of democracy as opposed to concepts imported from abroad. On the occasion of the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of overthrowing the communist regime, SNS Vice-Chairperson Anna Malíková declared: “The meaning of November 89 is to preserve free, critical and – most of all – original way of thinking so that we are able to prevent oth-

ers from telling us what is and what is not correct or democratic ... The principal challenge for the future is to defend an independent and sovereign Slovakia and build it in a way we imagined it to be".<sup>13</sup> According to the SNS, "the most tangible" and "historically most valuable" outcome of the regime change from 1989 was the split of former Czechoslovakia that followed and the subsequent emergence of the independent Slovak Republic, i.e. exercising the Slovak nation's right of self-determination.<sup>14</sup>

When interpreting interests of the state, HZDS representatives always liked to point out that their political subject was their authentic upholder, not only as the initiator of processes that eventually led to emergence of independent Slovakia but also as a political subject that enjoyed the highest voter support. According to this interpretation, activities by opposition forces or any opponents of the government should be perceived as "hostile to the state". SNS leaders embraced identical argumentation. Their party could not boast such a massive voter support as the HZDS could at the time; however, they strove to emphasize the fact that the SNS was the first political subject in Slovakia to further the concept of Slovakia's state independence after November 1989 and therefore it was the true upholder of "national values". Along the same lines, SNS representatives often dismissed criticism from their political and ideological opponents as "anti-national".

While the ZRS, the second largest ruling party in the period of 1994–1998, lacked any detailed concept of Slovakia's statehood, it always advertised its reluctance to embrace fundamental changes introduced after 1989, including the democratic regime. In fact, ZRS leaders viewed various social problems and negative social phenomena as a direct consequence of the regime change. "Our young Slovak Republic is just being born and that's why we struggle with many problems. We create laws and develop the economy, but democracy has brought us a lot of misfortune to us," ZRS Chairman Ján Lupták said in 1997.<sup>15</sup> "All November 17 means is that we have paid too big a toll for freedom of speech and democracy in the welfare area ... This nation had to learn the hard way and that's why we don't subscribe so much to [the ideas] they proclaimed on the streets ... After all, November means nothing to me."<sup>16</sup> The anti-capitalist profile of the ZRS was manifested especially through efforts to halt the process of denationalizing economy, particularly privatization of so-called strategic enterprises. The party appealed mostly to people with etatist, egalitarian and anti-free-market views; however, the ZRS electorate was not sufficiently stable and its strongly submissive position in the coalition with the HZDS and SNS was one of principal reasons behind its defeat in the 1998 parliamentary elections.

The attitude to power execution all ruling parties shared between 1994 and 1998 largely stemmed from their preferred model of governance; this understanding became the main driving force behind serious democratic deficits that eventually dashed the country's integration ambitions, led to society's political polarization and strengthened confrontation between principal political forces. These deficits motivated democratically-oriented citizens to increase their participation in the 1998 parliamentary elections. High voter mobilization contributed to changing the political landscape and forming a ruling coalition that comprised non-populist, non-nationalist and pro-democratic parties. For almost eight years that followed (i.e. 1998–2006), national populism parties were banned from the executive.

The key factor that laid the ground for national populists' mutual cooperation after the 2006 elections was that in terms of preferred governance model and political regime, all three parties of the incumbent ruling coalition – SMER-SD, SNS and HZDS – may be described as etatist parties, although etatism in their activities shows to a different degree and is differently accentuated.

SMER-SD openly subscribes to etatism as the foundation of its political profile and advocates government's strong role in a number of areas; etatist paternalism of SMER-SD was fully exposed in a symptomatic statement by its chairman Robert Fico who said at the beginning of 2008 that government should be “the father of all citizens”, just like the church is the “mother for believers”.<sup>17</sup> The SNS considers an independent Slovak state to be the greatest social value and embodiment of long-term emancipation ambitions of the Slovak nation. The HZDS also emphasizes the importance of independent Slovak statehood; besides, it claims special credit for direct participation in the process of establishing it in 1993.

All ruling parties' positions on the character of the state are affected by ethnic and nationalist approach (i.e. obvious preference of the national principle over the civic one) as well as tendencies to mythologize history, the appropriation syndrome and negligence of issues related to the type of regime, quality of democracy, liberal-democratic foundation of Slovakia's constitutional system and importance of abiding by the principles of constitutional liberalism. Some measures the SNS proposed to ensure proper performance of government's functions directly contradicted basic principles of liberal democracy, for instance repeated proposals to pass a repressive bill on the protection of the republic or to outlaw the party that politically represents the country's ethnic Hungarians. Clear inclination to the concept of national state that is based on the nation's ethnic definition may be demonstrated by peculiar notions about the Slovaks' specific historic role

that are presented by some SNS leaders; for instance, head of the SNS parliamentary caucus Rafael Rafaj said that the consumerist Euro-Atlantic (i.e. Western) culture should be reminded that it has already fulfilled its role in the spiral of history and that it should now make room for Slavic culture to carry on the torch of collective consciousness. According to Rafaj, the chosen nation today is the Slovak nation that is the most moral and politically sinless.<sup>18</sup>

Ever since the 2006 parliamentary elections, two ruling parties (SMER-SD and SNS) have striven to strengthen national (or ethnic) elements of the Slovak statehood on the symbolic level. They do so under the pretext of inevitability to promote patriotism, Slovak identity, national solidarity, etc.

Already the prime minister, Robert Fico declared in July 2007 that “the Slovaks lack a national outburst” and that schools neglect education to patriotism. According to him, Slovakia is being engulfed by “the cancer of indifference, which is only one step away from national unconsciousness”.<sup>19</sup> A display of such indifference was inadequate attention most Slovak media paid to “patriotic celebrations” of the Day of St. Constantine and Methodius. At the end of 2007, Fico announced that the cabinet and all ruling parties would in the coming year focus on “awakening people’s national consciousness, encouraging their respect for state symbols and deepening general public’s patriotism and awareness of Slovak history and historical figures”. “[People’s] relation to the country is unsatisfactory,” Fico said. “Patriotism does not reach the quality one would expect in a developed country in the heart of Europe.”<sup>20</sup>

In the past, Fico demonstrated his patriotic orientation through proposals to launch a public debate over possible ways to strengthen people’s patriotism and improve their relation to the Slovak state, Slovak statehood and its symbols, for instance listening to the national anthem or raising the national flag at the beginning of each school week. In 2004 he proposed an amendment to the law on state symbols that sought to install a national flag in front of every school in Slovakia.

According to SMER-SD and the SNS, encouraging the Slovaks’ patriotism should take place as the process of distinguishing themselves from the Hungarians (this aspect is emphasized by the SNS) as well as from non-nationally oriented and cosmopolitan members of the majority with lukewarm attitudes to patriotism (this aspect has recently become a favourite issue of SMER-SD). This philosophy may be illustrated by Fico’s statement from July 2008 in which he emphasized the need to strengthen togetherness (“solidarity”) of the Slovaks that must be built as a “sturdy barrier against activities of the peculiar sort of adventurers who undermine

Slovakia's spiritual integrity".<sup>21</sup> In 2007, Fico publicly complained that Slovak media have become a shelter for "spiritual homeless [and] media kibitzers who are unable to identify with their homeland's fate or find their state identity".<sup>22</sup> Typical for this interpretation are efforts to combine ethnic, social and constitutional elements. A good example of this combination was Fico's public scolding of *Sme*, a daily that takes a critical approach to his administration, as "anti-government, anti-national and anti-people".<sup>23</sup> Dividing the Slovaks into true, nationally-oriented ones and those who inadequately identify themselves with independent Slovakia is typical of all parties of the incumbent administration.

In 2000 Fico admitted he "was not happy about splitting Czechoslovakia that had it all going [as a country]" and *de facto* distinguished himself from the category of active protagonists of dissolving it (i.e. the 'true Slovaks')<sup>24</sup>; nine years later, though, SMER-SD leaders have succumbed to so-called appropriation syndrome that previously afflicted mostly SNS and HZDS representatives; symptoms of this syndrome include glorifying all those who initiated and conducted the process of dissolving former Czechoslovakia, criticizing all those who at the time advocated the common Czechoslovak state and disparaging all the problems that accompanied the process of founding independent Slovakia, particularly those caused by authoritarian practices between 1994 and 1998. In 2002, SMER-SD Vice-Chairman Dušan Čaplovič publicly expressed regret over the fact that on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independent Slovakia's emergence, the Dzurinda administration proposed to bestow high state honours also to personalities that not only did not embrace the concept of independent Slovakia but they "actively opposed it and some of them demonstratively moved abroad afterwards".<sup>25</sup> This view was seconded by HZDS Chairman Vladimír Mečiar who publicly complained in 2002 that "a significant proportion of constitutional posts are held by those who did not want the Slovak Republic as an independent country".<sup>26</sup>

According to Fico, loyalty to national values is an irreplaceable factor determining a country's survival in the modern world. "The only chance to survive in this complicated and unjust environment with dignity and sovereignty is to stick to Slovak national and state interests and pull together, whether we are on the right, on the left or in the middle," Fico declared. "I hereby call on [embracing] such togetherness."<sup>27</sup> Fico also said it was "our duty [to build] Slovak pride" and encouraged the Slovaks to draw inspiration from "the Russians whose pride was restored by President Putin". To a follow-up question reminding him that Russia suffers from a democratic deficit, Fico responded by saying that he did not know what

national pride had to do with democracy.<sup>28</sup> The formulation indicates that in the process of building the state, the incumbent prime minister views the national (or ethnic) element to be much more important than the quality (or democratic substance) of the regime.

In November 2007, SMER-SD issued an official statement that placed the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in the context with the Slovaks' yearning for state independence,<sup>29</sup> this despite the fact that social turmoil in November 1989 was completely free of such undertones; in fact, apart from general opposition to the totalitarian regime, citizens showed mostly support for the common Czechoslovak state and 'return to Europe'.

For the SNS, the use of 'patriotic' motives forms an integral part of its confrontational desire to distinguish the Slovaks particularly from the Hungarians. This may be illustrated by the ongoing process of installing typical Slovak double crosses in various regions of Slovakia, including localities inhabited by mixed Slovak–Hungarian population. According to party leaders, the goal of the entire campaign is to show "the whole world that the Slovak nation is autochthonous on this territory, so that it is clear to everybody where Slovakia is and who is at home here."<sup>30</sup>

The element of confrontation is also obvious in party leaders' references to the Constantine-Methodist tradition as the foundation of the Slovaks' statehood and identity. The SNS emphasizes the Slovaks' exclusive 'patent' to this tradition and juxtaposes it to other cultural traditions, including those that form the foundation of integration groupings Slovakia is part of. According to SNS leaders, "the Constantine-Methodist tradition is the oldest and the most solid part of the Slovaks' identity. The Slovaks are ahead of other nations because the Constantine–Methodist legacy amalgamated in them both eastern and western values of European thinking. The existence of the Slovak Republic shows that the Constantine-Methodist tradition is stronger than Hungarian chauvinism, Prague-invented Czechoslovakism or communist dictatorship."<sup>31</sup>

In 2005, SNS Chairman Ján Slota declared that had the Constantine-Methodist tradition been upheld in Slovakia, its national economy would not have been massively sold out "to foreign hands". Slota called Slovak politicians "vassals who pledge their allegiance to further unspecified Euro-Atlantic values", adding it was necessary to apply on an everyday basis the message of the mission of St. Constantine and Methodius, which is to "defend the Slovak land permanently".<sup>32</sup>

The SNS is the most active of all Slovak parties in fuelling the sense of danger to Slovak statehood and proposing such measures to defend it whose repressive nature contradicts basic principles of liberal democracy.

One of its favourite legislative measures is so-called ‘bill on the protection of the republic’. The SNS comes up with some form of the bill in every opportune moment, citing the need to neutralize consequences of Hungarian politicians’ activities in Slovakia; the last time the SNS proposed such a bill was in 2008. In the same year, Štáňa emphasized the principle of ethnic solidarity as the foundation to build mutual relations between citizens and government by stating that Slovak media were obliged to speak of Slovakia being threatened by Hungarians: “Is this democracy to give a bad name to one’s compatriots and one’s nation and give a good name to those strangers who clearly wish to harm the interests of this nation and this country?”<sup>33</sup>

## INTERPRETATION OF SELECT HISTORIC EVENTS

In their interpretation of national history, national populists tend to mythologize and ethnicize history, present the titular nation as older than it is, place its ethnogenesis as far back in history as possible, show clear inclination to positive evaluation of authoritarian historic figures and a tendency to favourable evaluation of historic periods in which the nation was ruled by authoritarian regimes. National populists reproach critics of the said mythologizing approach, including representatives of established academic circles, for insufficient national orientation and attempt to question their professional credibility.

Premier Fico described his administration’s attitude to the issue of Slovakia’s history as cultivating “sound historicism as part of government policy” with respect to those who underrate the “national” element in history. “Unfortunately, we live in a reality where so-called spin doctors consider everything Slovak good enough to disparage it,” he said.<sup>34</sup>

In 2008, SMER-SD chairman attempted to introduce the term of “ancient Slovaks” to the public and professional historical discourse. According to him, “ancient Slovaks” led by King Svätopluk ruled over the Great Moravian Empire while “other states had nothing – maybe some animals wandering around but certainly no state entities”.<sup>35</sup> Many academic historians view the theory of “ancient Slovaks” who inhabited the Great Moravian Empire as a mythological construct that does not correspond to findings of historical science.

Fico openly demonstrated his inclination to mythologizing Slovakia’s history early in 2008 when he defended the historical figure of highwayman Juraj Janošík and called him the first socialist: “I want to ask the media not to belittle Slovak legends,” Fico said. “It’s been enough. We

have but [two options]: either respect the Jánošík tradition or replace the nation ... Anti-Slovakism still dwells as a hidden bacillus in some Slovak historians. That is why these spiritually homeless people object to a free discussion over new terminology that speaks of ancient Slovaks or King Svätopluk.”<sup>36</sup> According to Fico, “the media launched an inquisitorial witch-hunt against everything that is Slovak [...]. Only spiritually homeless or nationally ignorant may [strive to] deprive the nation of the legend about Jánošík who struggled against social oppression.”<sup>37</sup>

National populists’ inclination to positive perception of “nationally-oriented” historical figures with an authoritarian profile may be illustrated by efforts to pass a special law on the merits of Andrej Hlinka, a Catholic priest and one of the Slovak nation’s principal political leaders in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The SNS proposed that Hlinka be officially referred to as “the father of the nation”. One of the most active protagonists of the idea to pass the special law on Hlinka was SMER-SD Vice-Chairman and Minister of Culture Marek Maďarič who declared that Hlinka’s “personality is unambiguous” and “his merits are extraordinary”. The positive evaluation of Hlinka would be imposed in an authoritative fashion that, if enforced in practice, could even restrict freedom of scientific research and public discussion. Maďarič called voices arguing that Hlinka’s historical profile deserves detailed discussion “perfidious”, arguing that “Hlinka’s personality deserves mostly respect”.<sup>38</sup> In line with this attitude, the SNS directly proposed to punish critical evaluation of Hlinka as “defamation of Hlinka’s name”. The HZDS also supported ‘enacting’ Hlinka’s merits; according to Chairman Mečiar, his party endorsed the SNS position more than that of the opposition KDĽ that submitted a more moderate bill on Hlinka.

A special place among historic events whose interpretation is particularly important in terms of impact on Slovakia’s socio-political development is emergence and existence of the wartime Slovak State. The official state doctrine of the Slovak Republic is based on the anti-fascist tradition embodied in the Slovak National Uprising of 1944. The modern Slovak Republic is considered a successor to the Czechoslovak Federation but neither legal nor political successor to the wartime Slovak State proclaimed in March 1939; however, a revisionist perception of the period of 1939–1945 has become part of the country’s public and political discourse regarding the issue of national history after 1989. An integral part of this perception is the thesis that the wartime state (also called “the first Slovak Republic”) was *de facto* a predecessor of the modern Slovak Republic, efforts to separate the totalitarian regime established by the fascist Hlinka’s Slovak



People's Party (HSEŠ) from the state itself, portray life in Slovakia during this period in a more positive light, disparage the regime's repressive, undemocratic and racist character, shift responsibility for perpetrated war crimes, including deportations of Jews, from domestic actors onto their external partners (i.e. Nazi Germany) and emphasize the positive role of its president Jozef Tiso.

The said inclination to favourable perception of the wartime Slovak State leads to (directly or indirectly) confrontational efforts to distinguish from certain opinion or identity groups, including people with anti-fascist and liberal-democratic views, supporters of the common Czechoslovak state, the Jews, the Roma, the Czechs, non-Catholics, etc. After 1989, principal upholders of revisionist views of the period of 1939–1945 included nationalistically-oriented cultural associations and individuals (including some historians), *Matica slovenská*, and a significant part of the Catholic Church leaders; on the level of the country's party system, it was primarily the SNS.

The SNS began to advertise its positive views on Slovak statehood from World War II immediately after its founding in 1990 and furthered them every time it was part of government (i.e. in 1993–1994, 1994–1998 and 2006–2009). In March 1998 it issued a declaration in honour of founding the Slovak State in 1939, calling it the beginning of the first sovereign statehood of the modern Slovak nation. According to the SNS, March 14, 1939, “clearly showed the Christian values to which the Slovak nation must be anchored”<sup>39</sup>

The SNS insisted on introducing *The History of Slovakia and the Slovaks*, a history textbook by revisionist historian Milan Ďurica, to primary schools' curriculum. SNS Vice-Chairperson Anna Malíková called the book whose author strove to excuse deportations of Jews during World War II a “very valuable and objective overview of Slovakia's history”<sup>40</sup>. In April 1998, the SNS publicly called Tiso a “martyr who defended the nation and Christianity against Bolshevism and liberalism”. Addressing the nature of Slovakia's political and constitutional regime between 1939 and 1945, the party declared: “The concept of harmonizing state of the estates that complied with social teachings of the Catholic Church with a balancing role of parliament surpassed European development in the sensitive social area during this period”<sup>41</sup>.

In October 1998, SNS Chairman Šlota openly called for Tiso's rehabilitation, stating: “Those who claim that the wartime Slovak State in 1939–1945 was fascist simply play their mean dirty tricks.”<sup>42</sup> Then SNS spokesman Rafael Rafaj who became the head of the party's parliamentary

caucus in 2006 argued it was misleading to use not only the term of ‘clerical fascism’ but even the term of fascism as such with respect to the Slovak State’s regime; according to him, the term was made up by the communist propaganda that used it to refer to “everything that stands against communism in any way”.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most overt attempt to excuse the so-called solution to the Jewish issue during World War II in Slovakia was presented by late MP Bartolomej Kunc (SNS), former Chairman of the SNS Professional Club for Christian Policy. In an interview for TV Nova in May 1996, Kunc resorted to ‘explanatory’ arguments of socio-economic nature by stating: “The Slovak Republic was not based on racist laws. Those economic aspects that you apparently have in mind, those were brought to force even before adopting the Jew Code that later paved the way for such things as deportations. It was an attempt to correct in some way an unfortunate state of affairs when too big a share of national wealth was controlled by too few people – only 3.6 percent of the population. This concentration of wealth in Jewish hands had its specifics. Those who did not live here and did not study the issue have no idea about this. The point is that the Slovak people were exploited and impoverished, which was a way to transfer ownership of national wealth into the hands of that small group of citizens”.<sup>44</sup>

In 2000 Slota defended a decision by the Žilina municipal council to unveil a plaque in honour of Jozef Tiso, arguing that other countries also honoured their fascist leaders: “In Hungary’s capital [they have a statue of] Horthy, who was a big time fascist, on a big horse,” Slota said. “All around Italy you see countless busts of the fascist Mussolini, in Germany and Austria you see loads of various plaques celebrating or commemorating Hitler.”<sup>45</sup>

Two years later, Slota demanded that “all circumstances and true information on the execution of Tiso be made available to the Slovak public”. He declared that if political meddling with the trial and abuse of justice is established, Tiso should be rehabilitated. Slota called conviction and execution of Tiso a “vendetta” and a “murder commissioned by the Czechs and communists”.<sup>46</sup>

Slota came up with a truly peculiar interpretation of the wartime Slovak State, calling it an important survival factor of the Slovaks. “[This state] saved the nation from liquidation by German and Hungarian anti-Slavic fascism,” he said. In 2005, Rafaj declared that “time has come to [proclaim] and socially accept March 14, 1939, as the date of establishing historically first Slovak statehood”, placing the wartime Slovak State onto the “contin-

uum of unchanged endeavour to exercise the nation's right of self-determination within its own state".<sup>47</sup>

SNS leaders' positive views of the "first Slovak statehood" were automatically reflected in their negative perception of the Slovak National Uprising (SNP). In 2002 Slota declared that the SNP laid the ground for communist totality and the country's Soviet satellitization, adding that the SNP "was abused for 40 years to promote red totality" and that it "has lost its moral credit".<sup>48</sup>

After 2006, official views presented by SNS representatives regarding the period of 1939–1945 saw a slight shift. While party chairman Slota virtually avoids making any public comments on the issue, positive views are most frequently presented by a former emigrant and now MP for SNS Jozef Rydlo. According to him, Slovakia's constitutional history did not begin on September 1, 1992, when the Slovak National Council passed the currently valid Slovak Constitution but on July 21, 1939, the day of adopting the constitution of the wartime Slovak State. "Without the first Slovak Republic there would be no second," Rydlo said, arguing that the Slovak State's political regime should be distinguished from the state itself. Like other SNS leaders, Rydlo condemns deportations of Jews from Slovakia as abominable practices; on the other hand, he opposes attempts to disparage the state as such, reasoning that the former Czechoslovakia was also ruled by a communist regime. "Nobody questions existence of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic just because it was undemocratic," he said.<sup>49</sup>

But the most significant shift in SNS leaders' interpretation of the World War II period in recent years may be noticed with respect to the SNP. In 2004 SNS Vice-Chairperson Anna Malíková-Belousovová called the SNP an act of "the Slovaks' opposition to fascism" but refused that the move was aimed against their own state. "The SNP shall enjoy an honourable place in Slovakia's history," she said.<sup>50</sup> In August 2006, Belousovová declared that the SNS took its hat off to hundreds and thousands of victims claimed by the struggle against "perverted fascist ideology and its upholders".<sup>51</sup> These statements illustrate SNS leaders' overall perception of Slovakia's history during World War II, which is full of confusing and ambiguous interpretations. While these statements cannot be qualified as intentional nourishing of pro-fascist sentiments, they were undoubtedly inspired by efforts to appeal to those nationalist-oriented voters who view positive perception of 'the first Slovak statehood' as a display of true 'patriotism'.

On a declaratory level, SMER-SD fully embraces the ideological legacy of the anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising. Its chairman Robert Fico repeatedly presented public statements in which he unambiguously con-

demned “the fascist regime” of the wartime Slovak State led by Tiso as well as war crimes perpetrated during that period. In order to strengthen his party’s image of a principled anti-fascist force, Fico declared in 2007 that he would not have any attempts to revise the government’s official position on the SNP, claiming that “the cabinet will clamp down on [anybody] questioning the Slovak National Uprising”.<sup>52</sup>

However, several serious cracks recently appeared in this seemingly integrated attitude of SMER-SD. It was not only its government cooperation with the SNS whose leaders harbour ambiguous views of the wartime Slovak State. Far more importantly, it was party leaders’ tolerance of the fact that one MP for SMER-SD co-authored an anthology of odes to Jozef Tiso and their repeated defence of professional credit of historians who openly supported his views on particular issues of the Slovaks’ ancient history; some of them were revisionist historians who openly advertise their sympathies to the wartime Slovak State and its President Jozef Tiso.

Besides, the unambiguousness of officially declared anti-fascist positions of SMER-SD has been rendered increasingly relative by the constant support chairman Fico shows to leaders of *Matica slovenská* who are the most vocal members of the opinion stream that demands a revision of the standing official anti-fascist doctrine in interpretation of the World War II period, including political rehabilitation of Jozef Tiso.

Although the HZDS has officially subscribed to the SNP legacy since its founding, some representatives of the party’s nationalist wing between 1991 and 2002 presented apologetic statements regarding the wartime Slovak State and critical views of the SNP, which put them on the same platform with upholders of revisionist concepts. For instance, a group of MPs for HZDS in 1997 visited the parental home of Jozef Tiso in Bytča. The visit was supposed to demonstrate the party’s endeavour to evaluate the president of the wartime Slovak State in a more “balanced” manner in order to “shed more light [onto his personality] ... eliminate various lies and bias ... and assess all his negative but also positive acts with cool head”.<sup>53</sup>

In summer 1997, then HZDS spokesman Vladimír Hagara defended the already mentioned history textbook *The History of Slovakia and the Slovaks* that featured actual adoration of the wartime Slovak State and tried to make light of war crimes its regime perpetrated with respect to Jews, which was the main reason why the book’s distribution to primary schools was halted on a request by the European Commission. According to Hagara, Ďurica’s publication was a “well researched piece of science work that deserves admiration and respect of all Slovaks”.<sup>54</sup> At that time, though, HZDS

Chairman Vladimír Mečiar openly labelled the wartime Slovak State's regime as "fascist".<sup>55</sup>

In recent years, LS-HZDS tried to avoid the public debate on issues related to the wartime Slovak State and SNP; occasionally, it releases rather general and vague statements. "Historians owe us a lot regarding the issue of [wartime] Slovak State," Mečiar declared in 2007. He also made light of the fact that positive views about the wartime Slovak State appeared increasingly frequently in Slovakia by alleging that "the entire [Czech] cabinet visited the grave of [Czech Protectorate's Prime Minister Emil] Hácha and the entire Hungarian cabinet visited the grave of [Hungary's Regent Miklós] Horthy". According to Mečiar, the issue of "the first Slovak Republic" should not be turned into an acute political issue.<sup>56</sup>

SMER-SD leaders' preference of ethno-national element over the civic-democratic one clearly showed on the occasion of commemorating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of founding the first Czechoslovak Republic (ČSR). Party leaders issued several public statements in which they emphasized that founding of the Czechoslovak state in 1918 amounted to materialization of the Slovaks' emancipation efforts and desires to liberate from "an almost thousand-year Hungarian hegemony" and terminate "an almost thousand-year forced coexistence between Slovakia and Hungary"<sup>57</sup> and that existence of the ČSR allowed for "further development of attributes such as Slovak nation and Slovak statehood". The fact that the ČSR was primarily a state with a democratic system of government was largely overlooked in public statements by SMER-SD; while they did positively evaluate "democratic environment" of the first ČSR, they simultaneously pointed out that "a failure to tackle social issues led the first ČSR into a serious economic crisis that befell Slovakia in particular".<sup>58</sup>

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

In 2003 Fico declared that the communist regime was more socially-oriented and that people were better off back then. While acknowledging that the Velvet Revolution of November 1989 did bring about important political and civil rights, he claimed that these rights had become merely formal, which was the biggest disappointment. Fico believes that strong financial groups and corporations have seized control over Slovakia and that people's

standard of living is worse today than it was under the communist regime. Also, he is convinced that the Velvet Revolution was a classic political coup d'état that had been prepared long before from the outside – as opposed to from within Czechoslovakia – and that students and other citizens were brought to the streets only to make an impression of masses demanding changes.<sup>59</sup>

When evaluating certain symbolic events related to the communist regime (e.g. the anniversary of the communist putsch in February 1948), SMER-SD opts for 'emergency exits' such as a declaration in which the party claimed that it "looks into the future and leaves evaluation of historical events up to historians. Everything negative from the past should be condemned and everything positive should be made an example of".<sup>60</sup>

While the party emphasizes positive aspects of particular Slovak protagonists of the communist regime in specific historical periods (e.g. Gustáv Husák during the SNP, Vladimír Clementis after World War II when he was executed by the communist regime or Alexander Dubček as a leading figure of the Prague Spring), it tends to avoid addressing more controversial aspects of their respective political careers.

The HZDS verbally subscribes to the legacy of November 1989 as a historic event that removed totality and paved the way to restoring democracy in the country. The HZDS presents itself as a direct successor to political forces generated by the civic movement that led to toppling the oppressive communist regime. In 1998, the official website of then-prime minister Vladimír Mečiar featured information that he was "one of leading personalities of 1989, which was the landmark of bringing down the communist regime". Since the said information was not even remotely true, it was eventually removed from the website,<sup>61</sup> however, the case illustrates that the HZDS does not hesitate to resort to expedient interpretation of important historic events that portrays the subject in a better, more 'democratic' light with respect to November 1989.

On the other hand, the HZDS never took the initiative of entering public debates on various aspects of the country's development during the period of communism and never used anti-communist rhetoric. The closest any HZDS official ever came to criticizing the past regime was MP Ján Cuper (HZDS) who in 1996 called the communist regime a "failed experiment".<sup>62</sup> During the period of democratic deformations caused by the authoritarian rule by the populist coalition of HZDS – ZRS – SNS when democratic opposition pointed out that government's power practices contradicted basic democratic principles and values of the Velvet Revolution and organized protest rallies designed to revive the November legacy, the HZDS

accused its representatives of “trying to usurp November 17 and score political points from it”.<sup>63</sup> Such diction clearly indicates that the HZDS never quite embraced the legacy and values of November 1989.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS REGARDING ACTIVITIES OF NATIONAL POPULISTS IN SLOVAKIA

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

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

Naturally, effectiveness of national populists’ mobilization strategies has not only an ethnic-nationalist dimension but also a social one. Strengthening populist parties’ position in Slovakia in recent years should be viewed in the context of socio-economic developments, an area where thorough liberal reforms were implemented after 1998 but especially between 2002 and 2006. Some population groups’ aversion to these reforms’ social impact (actual or fictitious) combined with lingering anti-capitalist and anti-liberal

sentiments created a generally favourable social environment for populists and elevated to power the segment of the political elite that is appreciated by voters for its ability to lead confrontational struggles, use militant rhetoric, expose imaginary enemies and defend collective entities national populists like to identify themselves with (i.e. people, state or nation). The nationalist appeal falls quite naturally within this formula.

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

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

## NOTES

- 1 These methods include appeals to ordinary people via promises to protect their interests against those who do not care for them in an apparent effort to attract so-called protest voters; harsh criticism of the political establishment, incumbent administration and established 'mainstream' parties for their alleged corruption; unclear program orientation and proclaiming 'people's character' of one's own political creed; attempts to appeal to the broadest possible electorate combined with labelling certainly social groups as 'isolated'



- from the common folk (e.g. the wealthy, capitalists, sophisticated intellectuals, etc.); egalitarian motives in addressing voters and generally anti-elitist rhetoric; advertising one's own 'know-how' to solve existing social maladies; promises of swift changes for the better; adapting proposed solutions to prevailing public opinion trends, etc.
- 2 For further information, please see Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Bútorá, Martin – Kollár, Miroslav: "Slovakia" in Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Smilov, Daniel (eds.): *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2008).
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  - 4 "Vladimír Mečiar tvrdí, že Slovensko potrebuje zákon na ochranu štátu" ['Vladimír Mečiar Claims Slovakia Needs State Protection Act'], *Sme* daily, April 1, 1996.
  - 5 "Podľa I. Gašparoviča má Trestný zákon ochrániť malú a mladú Slovenskú republiku pred nerozumným konaním" ['Criminal Code Is Supposed to Protect Small and Young Slovak Republic from Imprudent Actions, says I. Gašparovič'], *Národná obroda* daily, October 22, 1996.
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  - 8 "J. Slota: Chceme upozorniť na nebezpečenstvá" ['J. Slota: We Mean to Warn about Dangers'], *Národná obroda* daily, August 17, 1995.
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  - 10 Fajčíková, Kveta: "Podľa Húsku SR bola nechceným dieťaťom veľmocí, ktoré by nás radšej videli v košiari" ['The Slovak Republic Was an Unwanted Child of Superpowers that Would Rather See It Sheep-Folded, Says Húska'], *Sme* daily, December 16, 1996.
  - 11 *Nemôžeme byť abstraktní* ['We Cannot Afford to Be Abstract'], an interview of Nora Slišková, Pavol Minárik and Ján Škoda with Vladimír Mečiar, *Pravda* daily, July 4, 1996.
  - 12 "Keď strany prestanú znásilňovať štát, niet zábrany, aby všetci mohli byť znovu bratia – tvrdí V. Mečiar" ['Once Parties Stop Violating the State, There Is No Hindrance to All People Being Brothers Again, Says V. Mečiar'], *Sme* daily, June 27, 1997.
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  - 14 "Za najcennejší výsledok „novembra“ považuje SNS zánik federácie" ['SNS Views Dissolution of Federation as the Most Valuable Result of 'November''], *Sme* daily, November 18, 1996.
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  - 19 "Sviatok: Fico na Devíne vyzýval na výchovu k vlastenectvu" ['Holiday: Fico in Devín Called on Education to Patriotism'], *SITA* news agency, July 5, 2007.

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- 27 “Fico na oslavách znovu vyzval k zjednoteniu spoločnosti” [‘Fico at Celebration Again Called for Society’s Unity’], *ČTK* news agency, August 29, 2008.
- 28 “Fico sa pýtal, kto tu žil” [‘Fico Asked Who Lived Here’], *Sme* daily, April 22, 2008.
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