

POLb1135, Spring 2020

Study Material – Nationalism and Extremism

Basic information:

Slovakia has necessary conditions for nationalist politics to emerge. The society includes several ethnic minorities, out of which two are relevant in terms of size and political importance. First, the Hungarians who compose around 8-9 per cent of the society and who are a historical legacy of joint past between Slovaks and Hungarians for about a thousand years. Second, a sizeable Roma minority lives in Slovakia. Despite the absence of any relevant Roma party, this minority is one of the main sources of nationalist appeals among far-right parties.

Main issues:

1. Changing targets of nationalists

An important issue is the time development of how nationalist parties changed their prime targets. Between 1989 and 1993, the core topic was the relations between Czechs and Slovaks in the federation. After both countries gained independence, this issue faded rapidly, and Slovak nationalists had to find a different source for mobilizing their voters.

SNS, as the main representative of nationalism in Slovak politics, switched its focus to Hungarians. Given the historical development, SNS warned the people from alleged aims of Hungarian parties to obtain autonomy or even separate the southern part of the country. Such message was fairly often given to voters during the 1990s. Besides Hungarians, SNS also targeted other subjects such as Roma, LGBTI, NATO, USA etc. In the presentation you can find some topics that SNS primed when it was part of government between 1994 and 1998; a period with the harshest anti-Hungarian appeals in Slovak politics so far.

A final change occurred after 2010 with the decline of SNS and the rise of LSNS. SNS announced a thorough shift in its profile (see the next point) and its shift towards more conservative issues without its once-dominant nationalist appeals. LSNS concentrated more on Roma minority and ignored Hungarians as any sort of a threat. Despite their differences, both these parties reacted in a similar way to the refugee crisis in 2015. They increased their focus on this issue by stressing differences between “conservative and Catholic” Slovakia and the Muslim immigrants and Islamic culture in general.

It is necessary to note that nationalism is not an issue of these two parties. Nationalist tendencies can be found in various other parties including HZDS, SMER-SD or We are Family

and to a lesser extent and in some periods even among other parties such as KDH or OLaNO. For example, while many social democratic parties in Europe showed more open policy towards migrants during the refugee crisis, SMER-SD was one of the strongest proponents of denial of any immigrants in Slovakia and built the whole campaign before 2016 general election around the issue of immigration.

2. Transformation of SNS profile

In 2012 election, SNS scored less than 5 per cent of votes and dropped out of parliament. As a reaction, the party changed its leader and elected Andrej Danko. The longtime leader Ján Slota was later expelled from the party due to financial misconduct. Before 2016 the party led a visible and mobilizing campaign claiming to be a new party with only loose links to the SNS in the previous years. On the other hand, the party leadership and its candidate list for the 2016 election still contained many people from the previous SNS era, including the 1990s.

The alleged change was reasonably visible in terms of anti-Hungarian nationalism. Compared to the era of SNS under Slota, SNS with its new leader Danko mostly omitted this topic. The party instead concentrated on national sentiments and conservative values. The decline of anti-Hungarian nationalism was best depicted after the 2016 election when SNS agreed to join the government together with the party Most-Híd. Such cooperation would be impossible with Slota as SNS leader.

During the following years, the party, however, failed to prove its substantial change. Although some of its previous radical appeals declined, its core profile kept some of its far-right character. The increasing fight against rights of LGBTI people as well as stress on conservative values and strict denial of immigration showed that SNS changed to some extent compared to its past however it kept substantial fragments of its previous ideological stance.

3. Rise of LSNS and overall growth of extremism

LSNS is currently the strongest far-right party in Slovakia, and by far it is the most extreme party of all. Its roots date back to Slovak Brotherhood, an association which transformed into a political party in 2005. Slovak Brotherhood (led by Marian Kotleba) praised the Slovak wartime state and its president Tiso. It also showed strict negative sentiments against the Roma minority. Its members were wearing similar uniforms than the units of the Slovak Wartime State and organized public meetings; however, without significant public response. In 2006 the party was dissolved by the Supreme Court by the state given its extreme right profile.

In 2010 LSNS emerged and it learned some lessons from its past. Compared to Slovak Brotherhood, LSNS focused primarily on Roma minority and left other issues largely behind

(check the article *We hate them all?* by Kluknavská and Smolík for more details). It used a very offensive language against Roma minority to mobilize its supporters however with only limited success as in both 2010 and 2012 general election the party scored less than two per cent of votes. Following that, LSNS also concentrated on other issues such as anti-establishment and anti-elitist appeals and more generally it equipped its language with populist messages to speak the voice of the protest voters.

In 2013 the party witnessed its first electoral success as its leader Kotleba was elected regional governor in one of eight regions in Slovakia. Although he was unable to obtain reelection and lost in 2017, his victory in 2013 was a clear signal of the rising influence of LSNS. As a proof and following a campaign that focused on the refugee crisis, in the 2016 general election, LSNS scored eight per cent of votes and gained parliamentary seats. As a reaction on its rising support and attempt was made to dissolve the party, however, the Supreme court denied this. Although LSNS continued in vast mobilization after 2016 using a network of alternative media, its result in 2020 was rather disappointing as it repeated its 8 per cent gains from the previous election. On the other hand, a second-in-row electoral success shows that LSNS established a stable position as a parliamentary party.

Some notes for discussion and reflection:

- Compare the far-right parties in Western European countries with far-right in CEE (especially Slovakia). What are the main similarities and the main differences?
- The development of LSNS can be labelled as *from uniforms to suits*. Think about the reasons and consequences of such a change.
- Compare the Hungarian and Roma minority in Slovakia and evaluate which factors affect the political position of an ethnic minority in politics.