

POLb1135, Spring 2020

Study Material – Party System of the New Millennium

Basic information:

The lecture aims to shed light on the development of the Slovak party system after crucial 1998 election. You are not supposed to learn the exact results of all political parties throughout the respective period but to cover the main trends and trajectories. As benchmarks use the governments formed after each election and check the consequences of their existence. There are slides in the presentation that summarize the main events concerning the list of governments.

Main issues:

1. Transformation of cleavages in Slovak politics

By examining the development after 1998, you should be able to track significant changes in the party system. Rather than learning all the names of parties and their main representatives, the trajectories and cleavages are more critical. The 1998 election is a crucial point not only because it led to the main defeat of the regime in the 90s but also because it forced democratic parties from left to right to cooperate in a joint coalition government. What is more, the new government had to adopt strict economic reforms with a negative impact on society. Given that leftist parties belonged to the government, the reforms drastically reduced their support among their voters. In connection with the establishment of Smer party by former high SDL official Robert Fico, the SDL party as the transformed communist party ceased to exist in 2002 when it scored less than 1.5 per cent of votes. 2002 thus witnessed a substantial defeat of the left parties.

The right-wing parties also experienced their losses in both 2006 and mainly in 2012. These defeats had different reasons. The decline of these parties in 2006 was primarily the consequence of concentrated and harsh liberal reforms which were perceived negatively by substantial segments of the society. The opposition (mainly Smer with rising support) mobilized its voters on these topics and even enhanced anti-government sentiments among the society. The defeat of right-wing parties in 2012 was the result of the inability of these parties to sustain as stable cabinet and due to the so-called Gorilla case that revealed vast corruption among political representatives and links between politics and large business.

In sum, although Slovak politics always included not just the classical left-right cleavage (see the lecture on nationalism and extremism for instance) before 2006, it seemed that the system

is stabilizing in such a way. Smer and SDKU occupied the positions of the main left and right parties, and their joint support was not far from 50 per cent. However, this ended shortly, and the recent period showed new cleavages and new actors on rising.

2. Rise of populism, anti-system elements and extremism in the recent decade

Following the 1998 election, many new parties emerged in Slovakia that succeeded in the following development. You should be able to distinguish several waves of these parties given the time of their emergence.

Like the first wave, SMER and ANO were established after the 1998 election. Although the polarizing effect of Vladimír Mečiar still existed in that time, it was declining when compared to pre-1998 election era. Note the difference between SMER/ANO and SOP. SOP was established shortly before the 1998 election, and it was forced to choose whether it belongs to pro-Mečiar or anti-Mečiar camp. In the case of SMER and ANO, such pressure was reduced, and they could present themselves as a third alternative to the voters. This option was rational, given the mood of the voters (check the slide with the results of a survey about the evaluation of governments led by Mečiar and Dzurinda). Out of these two, SMER is a more relevant party to study given its later dominant role in Slovak politics. Initially, the party refused any left-right positioning and was mostly populist. After the failure in 2002 election (the party aimed to win the election) it shifted more to the left. Check the slide that covers the time development of SMER voters to see these shifts.

After the 2006 election two new important parties emerged. The Freedom and Solidarity that filled the space of a new alternative for urban and liberal voters (some kind of renaissance of original ideas of SDKU that reduced its right-wing appeals after 2006 and moved more to the centre). The other case was party Most-Hid (Bridge) which was the result of internal tension in Hungarian SMK. After an unsuccessful 2006 election, the SMK changed its leadership. Its previous leader Bugár left the party and with several companions established the Most party. Officially the party claimed to create a 'bridge' over Slovak-Hungarian tensions and provide a platform for inter-ethnic cooperation. This partly worked but primarily this party gained the support of Hungarian voters, and for the upcoming decade it entirely replaced SMK in national politics. The emergence of Most led to a decline of SMK that lost parliamentary representation in 2012, and it kept only substantial representation on the regional and local level in the southern part of Slovakia with a predominance of Hungarians.

The final wave is rather broad as it covers parties that emerged after 2010. These include Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) and We are Family (SR). OLaNO is a unique project as the party emerged and continued to operate with only four members. Officially it proclaimed to serve as a platform for independent candidates, but it also included members of other smaller parties on its list. The party can be defined as populist, anti-party (given its structure and organization) and it primarily focused on anti-corruption agenda. LSNS is a case of an extreme right party (more

on this in the lecture on nationalism and extremism) that did not succeed in both 2010 and 2012 elections but increased its support after its leader Marian Kotleba won the office of regional governor in 2014. Eventually, the party entered parliament in 2016. The final party is SR, established by entrepreneur Boris Kollár. The party aims to protect families and conservative values (a slight paradox given that Kollár has ten children with nine women). It also includes strong populism (in its campaigns the party leader stresses he is not a politician) and some far-right tendencies.

Some notes for discussion or reflection:

- Compare the development of ex-communist parties (transformed or untransformed) in V4 countries to estimate which strategy was the best concerning their survival
- Note the main differences between waves of new parties
- Can you see some analogies in party development in Slovakia and Czech Republic in the recent decade? Concentrate on ideologies of new parties, personal features of their leaders, rise of populism etc.