Towards conservatism?
Party politics in Slovakia at the end of the 2010s

Marián Sekerák

Abstract
The Slovak political system has changed rapidly since the Republic’s formation in 1993. Today the number of ideologically conservative political parties is rapidly rising. This article clarifies some aspects of recent party-political developments in Slovakia. To provide an overview, only the most important social milestones have been taken into account. Specifically, the 2015 referendum on the protection of the ‘traditional family’, the mass civic protests that erupted in 2012 and 2018, and the business–mafia–political connections that have been exposed will be discussed.

Keywords
Slovakia, Central Europe, Political system, Party politics, Conservatism

Introduction
With regard to the internal political developments in the countries of the Visegrád Group (V4), there is a growing belief that the region has been gradually developing several illiberal democracies (Dawson and Hanley 2016; Buštíková and Guasti 2017; Buzogány 2017; Wilkin 2018). It is undeniable that the V4 states share not only a common identity (Terem and Lenč 2011) and a complicated history of totalitarian Communist rule (Veselý 2013; Livezeanu and Klimó 2017), but also the painful inheritance of its societal consequences.

This is evident in the social lives of the respective countries, which are controlled by powerful oligarchic structures and moguls rooted in the former regimes. These are, specifically, the managers of former state-owned foreign trade enterprises, prominent

Corresponding author:
M. Sekerák, AMBIS College, Lindnerova 575/1, 180 00 Prague 8 – Libeň, Czechia.
Email: marian.sekerak@ambis.cz

Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).
former members of the Communist Party and their descendants, Moscow State Institute of International Relations alumni and former State Secret Security agents. Although not all these personalities feature in all the V4 countries, the political systems of these countries are dominated by the parties and movements of conservative and nationalist ideologies. These ideologies address the concerns of the population about economic shortages and the loss of social benefits, the threat of Muslim immigrants, and the fear of the ‘decadent liberalism and multiculturalism’ of Western Europe.

Slovakia, which will be the focus of this article, is no exception. Although the political system has developed under similar circumstances to those of other post-Communist countries of the region, it has also demonstrated some peculiarities (Badinská and Kalický 2015). Since the 1990s, it has been predominantly inclined to national populism, Christian-based conservatism, and the search for a strong and charismatic political leader as personified by former Prime Ministers Vladimír Mečiar and Robert Fico (Kopeček 2004; Kováčik and Kluciarovský 2015).

Nevertheless, some differences can be identified that differentiate Slovakia from the other members of the V4. First and foremost, the Social Democratic party Direction—Social Democracy (Smer – Sociálna Demokracia; Smer–SD) has held a strong position for many years. The party, which until quite recently was positioning itself as left-wing and Communist successor (Marušiak 2005; Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2008), now encompasses some important conservative–national elements: emphasising Slovak folk traditions, mythicalising the nation’s history, offering open and pragmatic support from its chairman Robert Fico to the Catholic bishops, and rejecting the rights of non-heterosexual minorities. However, in 2019 there was an interesting political turnaround during the presidential and the European elections.

The former was a triumph for the self-described liberal lawyer Zuzana Čaputová, the first female president in the country’s history. The European elections, which have long been marked by low voter turnout (Gyarfašová and Henderson 2018), led to a victory for the liberal and centre–right coalition of Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko) and TOGETHER—Civic Democracy (SPOLU – Občianska demokracia). These facts should be looked at in the broader context of party system changes, specifically the evolution of a significant number of the parties towards conservatism. In what follows, then, I will elucidate some aspects of recent party-political development in Slovakia. In order to offer a complex overview, the most important social milestones will be taken into account, including the 2015 referendum on the protection of the ‘traditional family’, as well as the mass civic protests that erupted as a consequence of the exposure of business–mafia–political connections.

Some recent preconditions to party system change

The transformation of internal political processes in Slovakia has happened in three phases. First, at the beginning of 2012 the so-called Gorilla dossier was anonymously published online. It revealed several relationships between suspicious and unscrupulous businessmen
and top politicians (Školkay 2018). This led (1) to mass civic protests, which were concentrated in the capital city of Bratislava; (2) to the gradual extinction of the then-leading centre–right political party, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union—Democratic Party (Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – Demokratická strana; SDKÚ–DS) of former Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda; (3) to the fall of the centre–right cabinet led by Iveta Radičová (of SDKÚ–DS); and (4) to snap general elections in March 2012.

The political systems of most parliamentary democracies offer a relatively wide range of options for citizen involvement in the political decision-making process. This is also the case in Slovakia, where the referendum is one of the main tools of direct democracy permitted by the Constitution (Ondrová 2010; Kováčová 2018; Nemčok and Spáč 2019). The second phase of party evolution in Slovakia was instigated by a referendum on the protection of the ‘traditional family’ and a special approach to children’s education (Krošlák 2015; Rybář and Šovčíková 2016). It was held on 7 February 2015, initiated by the non-governmental organisation Alliance for Family and strongly supported by the Slovak Catholic Episcopal Conference.

Even though both public and media discourses prior to the referendum were very emotive, voter turnout was quite low at only 21.4%. The referendum was thus declared invalid as this was below the required 50% threshold. However, the referendum brought forward conservative elements of society which emphasised identity politics, produced a strong anti-liberal narrative, and caused an almost irreconcilable division of opinion between conservatives and liberals (Rončáková 2015). These changes still characterise the political discourse with which several political parties engage.

The last phase of transformation in the party system climaxed in the first half of 2018, after the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak. Kuciak achieved notoriety by publishing articles that demonstrated the links between politicians and the mafia. The publication of his articles triggered the largest mass protests since 1989 and led (1) to the (temporary?) departure of Robert Fico as prime minister, (2) to a cabinet reshuffle, and (3) to the decision of then President Andrej Kiska to form his own political party after completing his presidential term of office in order to take part in the next general election.

Conservatives wherever you look

As in any young democracy with a multipartite system, the transformation, emergence and extinction of political parties and movements happen rapidly. Therefore, there are a huge number of academic texts explaining some of the recent changes in the Slovak party system (Ondria et al. 2010; Pinterič and Žúborová 2014; Marušiak 2017; Hynčica and Šárovec 2018; Just 2019). The life cycle of some political parties is very short and sometimes does not even exceed one parliamentary term (for instance, the Union of the Workers of Slovakia/Združenie robotníkov Slovenska, Alliance of the New Citizen/Aliancia nového občana and Party of Civic Understanding/Strana občianskeho porozumenia). Others tend to show significant stability, a large membership and the ability to be a part of several cabinets, yet external as well as internal circumstances finally destroy
them (e.g. People’s Party—Movement for a Democratic Slovakia/Ľudová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko).

Although some academic texts analysed the party system after the 2016 general elections (Hlaváč 2016; Mihálik 2017; Kováčová and Jankurová 2017; Charvát and Just 2018), as well as the main divisions and topics of the election campaign (Walter 2018), the latest developments have not yet been described. All the changes that have taken place in Slovak party politics have not just encouraged the rise of the aforementioned centre–right and mildly liberal coalition entity that won the European elections. They have also demonstrated a stronger affiliation among many political parties with a markedly right-wing, conservative ideology which is often, at least symbolically, manifested by their support for ‘traditional values’ within the context of the Christian faith and institutional religiosity still prevalent in Slovakia.

We can see many interesting shifts in the conservative political right. The current leader of this stream, the Christian-Democratic Movement (Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie; KDH), has undergone major changes since March 2016, when it did not win any seats in parliament for the first time in its history. The movement ‘is traditionally presented as a conservative political party with Christian values, but its position in the economic dimension is more towards the left-centre due to strong state social security’ (Pinterič and Žúborová 2014, 361). In June 2016, Alojz Hlina became its chair as a result of internal reflections on the movement’s electoral losses. His was a fresh face that had not previously been inherently connected with the KDH. In 2012, he had run for parliament as a nominee of the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities movement (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti; OĽANO), which is currently represented in parliament under the leadership of Igor Matovič.

The KDH has experienced a number of fissures in recent years. In the summer of 2018, the emergence of another Christian-oriented movement called Christian Democracy—Life and Prosperity (Kresťanská demokracia – život a prosperita; KDŽP) was formally announced by some former KDH members. Its programme consists of 11 points, including a pro-life stance, support for the traditional family and the elimination of the EU’s influence in bioethical issues.

Prior to the 2019 European elections, the conservative Christian Union (Kresťanská únia) party was founded by former MEP and former KDH member Anna Záborská and Branislav Škripek, a former MEP for OĽANO. Neither of these formations was successful in the elections—unlike the KDH, which gained two MEPs. A now-defunct party, the Conservative Democrats of Slovakia (Konzervatívni demokrati Slovenska) attempted to address the conservative concerns of the Slovak electorate as well. The party operated between 2008 and 2014 without significant electoral success.

Another right-wing, conservative and pro-European political party is Go Right (Doprava). It is led by Ondrej Matej, a former MP for SDKÚ-DS, the party founded by Mikuláš Dzurinda, who was a member of the KDH from 1990 to 1998. Interestingly
enough, the SDKÚ-DS produced another party leader, Miroslav Beblavý, who would become chairman of the aforementioned centre–right TOGETHER—Civic Democracy. The parties Go Right, the KDŽP and the Christian Union currently have no significant citizen support in opinion polls.

The OĽANO movement can be described as ‘a political formation with significantly non-standard elements beyond the principles of political party system. The movement was never a classical political party but rather a group without an organizational structure or membership base’ (Hynčica and Šárovec 2018, 17). After the 2016 elections and significant internal turmoil, it managed to get 10 representatives into the parliament. The movement is led by the aforementioned Igor Matovič; a successful entrepreneur and publisher who built his political influence on strong criticism of the ruling party and its former chairman, Prime Minister Robert Fico. Additionally, a part of the Slovak public has also been impressed by his distinctive and specific political style. OĽANO, founded in 2011, is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists political family. The KDH is a member of the European People’s Party.

The Civic Conservative Party (Občianska konzervatívna strana) was founded in 2001 but has never succeeded in any elections. Its only MP is Ondrej Dostál, who is formally the party’s chairman, but was elected on the list of the liberal–conservative Freedom and Solidarity party (Sloboda a Solidarita; SaS) in 2016 as part of the opposition. Although the SaS has profiled itself as a liberal party, its liberalism focuses on economic issues rather than social ones. The Eurosceptic opinions of its chairman and former MEP Richard Sulík can be described as slightly conservative on social issues (cf. Hynčica et al. 2016, 177–8). On a European level it is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

One can see, then, that in the current composition of the parliament there is a whole series of parties that label themselves as conservative and Christian Democrat. This is especially true of the We are Family—Boris Kollár (Sme rodina – Boris Kollár) movement, led by the wealthy businessman and frequent subject of the tabloids Boris Kollár. The movement is strongly identity-oriented, being Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant and conservative on family values. It has similar values to Salvini’s Identity and Democracy political group, but failed to gain any seats in the 2019 European elections. Kollár’s movement has experienced a partial disintegration during the current parliamentary term as three deputies have left the party and become independent.

There is also the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana) which is led by Andrej Danko, the current speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. The party can be seen as nationalistic and Eurosceptic (see Gyarfášová and Mesežníkov 2015; Hynčica et al. 2016, 167–71; Danics and Tejchmanová 2017, 383–8), as well as built upon a Christian-oriented and conservative political ideology. It was founded in 1990 and is currently part of the coalition government together with Smer–SD and the centrist Bridge party (Most-Híd), which represents the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.

The most internationally famous party is Kotleba—People’s Party Our Slovakia, (Kotleba – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko), which is led by its founder Marian Kotleba.
A great deal of attention has already been paid to this party in the academic literature (Filipec 2017; Ŏurinová and Malová 2017; Vasiľková and Androvičová 2018), where it is often described as far right, Eurosceptic, national–populist, neo-Fascist, conservative, homophobic and anti-immigrant. Its two MEPs are independent of a European political party grouping after the 2019 European elections.

A ‘presidential party’

A short remark should be made on the party For the People (Za ľudí), which has been set up by former president of Slovakia Andrej Kiska. It is to be formally established in autumn 2019, but for now its programme thesis involves quite general proclamations such as ‘It will be the centrist party that will take care of people and will deal with their worries. A party whose ambition will be to give people back what they deserve. They deserve better hospitals and affordable health care, better schools, highways and much more’ (Za ľudí 2019; author’s translation and emphasis). Kiska has successfully recruited several important regional politicians from all over Slovakia, as well as Veronika Remišová, who was previously a member of the OĽANO parliamentary caucus.

Although the party describes itself as centrist, its founder has proclaimed that it will be mildly conservative. After the end of his presidential term, he gave his first exclusive interview for the Slovak Christian-oriented conservative online daily newspaper Postoj.sk, in which he shed some light on his party’s ideological vision:

Certainly it will not happen that the party will proclaim that liberalism is a historical winner, no. No one will change me and you know my views on elementary issues. I have already commented on abortions, adoptions by homosexual couples, the Istanbul Convention, the legalization of marijuana, everything. . . . A few people I had known as moderate became extremely liberal when they entered the party Progressive Slovakia. (Kiska 2019; author’s emphasis)

With Kiska’s ‘presidential party’ entering the political battlefield, the already fragmented Slovak party spectrum will be widened even further, despite the ideological range of the aforementioned parties not differing significantly with respect to values. But two crucial differences between the parties seem to appear. First, their attitude towards the EU measured on the Euro-optimism–Euroscepticism scale. This will be a major dividing line between them in terms of their willingness to form a coalition and cooperate before or after the general elections. The second dividing line will be their attitude towards Smer–SD, which is marked by a lack of credibility due to the scandals that resulted in mass protests in 2018.

Conclusion

The current situation in the political spectrum is paradoxical as there are numerous political parties which deem themselves socially conservative. Moreover, the Social Democratic Smer–SD and the economically liberal SaS both have some elements typical of (right-wing) social conservatism. The problems of coalition formation are complicated not only
by the negative attitude of the political representation towards Smer–SD, but also by the profile of parties such as We Are Family—Boris Kollár and Kotleba—People’s Party Our Slovakia. These two are perceived as anti-establishment, while the latter is almost totally marginalised due to its far-right stance. Furthermore, the emergence of other political formations that rely on nationalist, right-wing and conservative ideology with a strong anti-EU orientation cannot currently be ruled out.

When you look at the present political divisions, the success of the liberal and moderately centrist coalition of Progressive Slovakia and TOGETHER—Civic Democracy is quite understandable. However, further development may bring the whole party system closer to polarised pluralism as defined by Giovanni Sartori. Polarised pluralism describes the existence of strongly centrifugal tendencies in party competition with principled opposition based on exclusive identities and radicalism.

The existence of anti-system and unstable parties with low coalition potential may complicate effective governance in Slovakia in the coming years. Alternatively, it could become the basis for very broad compromises for potential coalition parties, especially in terms of cultural–ethical values. Central positioning, in Sartorian terms, can be ensured by the two-member coalition that won the 2019 European elections. The possibility that this grouping will be enlarged by new members and become a predominantly centrist ‘coalition of the willing’ cannot be excluded. However, this would be nothing new in the history of Slovak party politics. Before the 1998 general elections, the Slovak Democratic Coalition, which no longer exists, was created. It purposefully brought together the then five opposition parties in order to democratically defeat Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, who had taken Slovakia into international isolation and to the brink of economic collapse. However, the members of that coalition were ideologically very different to each other.

References
Badinská, M., & Kalický, J. (2015). Social, cultural and historical preconditions for formation of the political system in Slovakia. Banská Bystrica: Belianum.
Buštíková, L., & Guasti, P. (2017). The illiberal turn or swerve in Central Europe? Politics and Governance, 5(4), 166–76.
Buzogány, A. (2017). Illiberal democracy in Hungary: Authoritarian diffusion or domestic causation? Democratization, 24(7), 1307–25.
Charvát, J., & Just, P. (2018). Political earthquake in 2016? Party system dynamics in Slovakia since 2002. Politické vedy, 21(1), 24–57.
Danics, Š., & Tejchmanová, L. (2017). Extremismus, radikalismus, populismus a euroskepticismus. Prague: Univerzita J. A. Komenského.
Dawson, J., & Hanley, S. (2016). What’s wrong with East-Central Europe? The fading mirage of the ‘liberal consensus’. Journal of Democracy, 27(1), 20–34.
Ďurinová, P., & Malová, D. (2017). Gender issues in Kotleba’s People’s Party of Our Slovakia: An attempt at a thematic analysis. Human Affairs, 27(1), 59–74.
Filipec, O. (2017). People’s Party – Our Slovakia: An anti-system party? In P. Horváth (ed.), Current trends and public administration (pp. 21–30). Uherské Hradiště: FSV UCM.
Gyarfásiová, O., & Henderson, K. (2018). Slovakia and the turnout conundrum. East European Politics, 34(1), 77–96.
Gyárfášová, O., & Mesežnikov, G. (2015). Actors, agenda, and appeal of the radical nationalist right in Slovakia. In M. Minkenberg (ed.), Transforming the transformation? The East European radical right in the political process (pp. 224–48). London: Routledge.

Hlaváč, M. (2016). Performance of political parties in the 2016 parliamentary election in Slovakia: Regional comparisons and district-level determinants. Regional & Federal Studies, 26(3), 433–43.

Hynčica, P., Maškarinec, P., & Novotný, L. (2016). Euroskepticismus ve střední Evropě. Prague: Academia.

Hynčica, P., & Šárovec, D. (2018). Slovenské politické strany optikou konceptu novosti. Acta FF ZČU, 10(2–3), 7–34.

Just, P. (2019). Slovak cabinet after 2016: From single party majority to motley crew. Journal of Comparative Politics, 12(1), 71–85.

Kiska, A. (2019). Určíme nebudeme hlasat, že liberalizmus je dejinný vít'az. Postoj.sk, 17 June. https://www.postoj.sk/44509/urcite-nebudeme-hlasat-ze-liberalizmus-je-dejinn-vitaz. Accessed 20 September 2019.

Kopeček, L. (2004). Institutionalization of Slovak political parties and charismatic leaders. Středoevropské politické studie, 6(1). https://journals.muni.cz/cepsr/article/view/4029/5292. Accessed 17 July 2019.

Kováčik, B., & Kluciarovsky, M. (2015). The phenomenon of strong political leadership embodied in Slovak prime ministers: Vladimír Mečiar and Robert Fico. In SGEM 2015: 2nd international multidisciplinary scientific conference on social sciences and arts, vol. I, book 2 (pp. 399–406). Sofia: STEF92.

Kováčová, E. (2018). The legal–theoretical terms of citizen participation in the administration of public affairs in the Slovak Republic. DANUBE: Law, Economics and Social Issues Review, 9(3), 153–75.

Kováčová, N., & Jankurová, A. (2017). Direction of Slovak party system after the parliamentary elections in 2016. Security Dimensions: International and National Studies, 22, 152–64.

Krošlák, D. (2015). The referendum on the so-called traditional family in the Slovak Republic. Central and Eastern European Legal Studies, 1, 149–67.

Livezeanu, I., & Klimó, Á. (eds.). (2017). The Routledge history of East Central Europe since 1700. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

Marušiak, J. (2005). Smer: From pragmatism to Social Democracy? Seeking identity. In L. Kopeček (ed.), Trajectories of the left. Social Democratic and (ex-)Communist parties in contemporary Europe: Between past and future (pp. 165–78). Brno: CDK, ISPO.

Marušiak, J. (2017). Political entrepreneurs as a challenge for the party system in Slovakia. Czech Journal of Political Science, 24(2), 179–200.

Mihálk, J. (2017). The electoral aftermath: New wave of populism and radicalism in Slovakia. In P. Horváth (ed.), Current trends and public administration (pp. 9–20). Uherské Hradiště: FSV UCM.

Nemčok, M., & Spáč, P. (2019). Referendum as a party tool: The case of Slovakia. East European Politics and Societies and Cultures. doi:10.1177/0888325418800551.

Ondria, P., Kováčik, B., & Kosír, I. (2010). The system of political parties of the Slovak Republic. Politické vedy, 13(2), 89–106.

Ondrová, J. (2010). Constitutional adjustment of the whole – National referendum in the Slovak Republic. Politické vedy, 13(2), 120–9.

Pinterič, U., & Žúborová, V. (2014). Party arenas in Slovenia and Slovakia. Društvena istraživanja, 23(2), 349–68.

Rončáková, T. (2015). Reconciling conservatives and liberals: Mission impossible? Revista Română de Jurnalism și Comunicar, 10(4), 28–40.
Marián Sekerák, Ph.D. studied political science at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia) and obtained his doctorate from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University (Czech Republic). He provides political analysis and is a lecturer at the AMBIS College, Prague. He specialises in political theory, the theory of democracy, the diplomatic activities of the Holy See and selected theological issues. His commentaries and analysis regularly appear in various state-wide Czech and Slovak media, including daily newspapers, websites, radio stations and TV channels.