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What Distinguishes Slovak Populism from the Western European Variants? Slovakia in Comparison With Austria[1]

The study examines the peculiarities of populism in Slovakia, which distinguish it from populisms in Western European countries. To show the differences, Slovak populists are compared with those from Austria, with examples from the political discourses on the refugee crisis and on minorities being brought in. The similarities and differences are elaborated by looking at three central characteristics of populism: flexibility and variability of the content of populism, political relevance, and graduality and non-binarity. The comparative perspective shows that these universal features of populism are particularly pronounced in Slovakia. Although Slovakia and Austria have both very distinctive experiences with politically successful populists, the populisms in the two countries are not the same. The comparison brings to light the differences between the post-socialist political landscapes on the one hand and the Western ones on the other, which are reflected in the different manifestations of populism in Slovakia and in Austria.

Key words: Populism; Slovakia; Austria; Post-Socialist Context; Populism as a discourse

Introduction

Since the country's founding in 1993, governments in Slovakia have been led mainly by populists, and the most successful parties have had a populist character. Populism refers here to the use of populist discursive frames. These convey an anti-elite message on behalf of the sovereign people, described positively and as a homogeneous entity. The antagonism between an "us" and a group of "them" forms the core of the populist frame. In addition to the vertical, anti-elitist criterion for identifying populism (us vs. them up there), a horizontal, xenophobic affect may be present (us vs. the others), in which case we speak of nationalist, national or right-wing populism (Aslanidis 2016, p. 98). If we follow this concept, we can say that the 1990s, for example, were marked by national-populist and social-populist governments under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (HZDS[2]). During „Mečiarism" until 1998, basic liberal-democratic principles such as the rights of the parliamentary opposition, constitutional jurisdiction, freedom of the press, or minority rights were strongly disregarded. Corruption, clientelism, and authoritarian methods were

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[2] *Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko* (HZDS), English: Movement for a Democratic Slovakia.

other central features of the government of the most successful Slovak populist of the 1990s (Kneuer 2005, pp. 92–96; Leška 2013, pp. 76–78). From 2006 onward, a phase of left-wing populist and national-populist governments followed under the party *Direction – Social Democracy* (Smer). The combination of nationalism and social demagogy brought Smer a sure victory in all parliamentary elections from 2006 to 2020. In 2006, under Prime Minister Róbert Fico (Smer), even three populist parties – Smer, HZDS, and *Slovak National Party* (SNS) – formed a governing coalition. Between 2012 and 2016, Smer led the government on its own; in 2016–2020, it governed with the nationalist and right-wing populist party SNS, among others. Populists also dominate current politics. The 2020 parliamentary elections won the anti-corruption movement *Ordinary People and Independent Personalities* (OĽaNO) around the former media entrepreneur Igor Matovič, which can be classified as a centrist populist party. OĽaNO then formed the government with three other parties, two of which are populist: the business-firm party *We Are Family* (SR) around the millionaire Boris Kollár and the moderate right-wing party *Freedom and Solidarity* (SaS). The left-wing Smer and neo-fascist *Kotlebists - People's Party Our Slovakia* (ĽSNS), also populist in character, entered the parliamentary opposition after the 2020 election (Rydza 2020).

In Slovakia, we can observe a remarkable variety of forms, intensities, and ideological varieties of populism. In this respect, it resembles other post-socialist East-Central European countries that share the experience of state socialism and the turbulent transformation to democracy and market economy and therefore have similar party systems and political cultures. At the same time, it differs from "Western" populism, i.e., from populism in countries without a state socialist past. To elaborate on this, this article discusses three central characteristics of populism in Slovakia: its great flexibility and variability in content and ideology, high political relevance, and graduality and non-binarity. In order to highlight the specifics of populism in the post-socialist context, Slovak populists are compared with populists in neighbouring Austria. Austria has one of the oldest and most successful right-wing populist parties in Europe, the *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ), which has been the third strong political force in the country alongside the SPÖ and ÖVP since at least the 1980s. Both Slovakia and Austria have distinct experiences with populist politicians. However, are the populisms in Slovakia and Austria the same?

Definition of Populism and Method

According to political scientist Karin Priester (2011), there are three fundamental conceptualizations of populism: as an ideology, as a strategy for acquiring and maintaining power, and as a discourse, which is applied in this paper. Following the concept, populism is expressed in the discursive construction of populist appeals. Essential here is the positive recourse to the sovereign people in contrast to the elites. Populists divide the world into "us" and "them". They interpret events and facts through the antagonisms between "good" people (e. g., the community of native citizens) on the one hand, and the "evil" elites, a particular power bloc (e.g., Brussels bureaucrats or corrupt government elite) on the other (Aslanidis 2016, p. 98).

The group of "us" can also be distinguished from "them" in an ethnonationalist[3] or nativist[4] manner but need not be.

The basis for identifying populism is not specific content but the form in which the content is presented. Accordingly, a party is not populist because of its ideology, which is considered populist or not, but because of the way it presents topics or ideas. It behaves populist by using the populist framing, i.e., the "us vs. them" antagonisms, when presenting its positions, solutions, or interpreting facts (Aslanidis 2016, p. 98). Populist framing, i.e., the use of populist discursive frames, is a purposeful activity of politicians through which they actively create political reality. The concrete content of the antagonistic juxtapositions ("us vs. them up there", "us vs. the others") varies according to the current social and political situation as well as the ideological and power-political position of the respective political actor.

By this concept, a party may behave populistically in a certain discourse or context, but may not in another. In the following, populisms in Slovakia and Austria are examined based on the discourses on minorities and foreigners (2010–2012) and the refugee crisis (2015–2018). By using the method of discourse analysis (Keller 2011), I studied the statements of the parliamentary political parties in the respective discourses. The material examined was the politicians' statements in selected media (online news portals and daily newspapers with the highest reach, popular TV and radio debates, and social media). The media were systematically analysed using a keyword search. Based on the politicians' behaviour in the respective discourses, the parties were classified as populist or non-populist.[5]

In this article, the Austrian and Slovak populisms are studied and compared using discourse analysis as well as secondary literature. The comparison focuses on politicians as actors who act in a populist or non-populist manner. Based on the key characteristics of populism (flexibility and variability, political relevance, graduality, and non-binarity) three criteria for the comparison were derived: First, ideologies and contents of the populists, second, their political relevance, and third, durability and consistency of a party's populism and its conformity with the party ideology. It is not the aim of this article to provide an exhaustive analysis of all populist parties or types of populism or to create a new typology of populism. The paper aims to show the different nature of populism, i. e. the way politicians use populist frames, in Western and Eastern European political contexts.

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[3] Ethnonationalism is a form of nationalism that sees ethnicity as a core component of the concept of „nation". In contrast to state nationalism (the struggle of ethnic groups for their nation-state), ethnonationalism is about asserting the interests of one ethnic group against those of other ethnic groups (Houben 2005, pp. 56 f.).

[4] Nativism is a combination of xenophobia and nationalism. Nativism implies that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group („the nation"), i.e., those born in the country, and that all non-native persons or ideas represent a fundamental threat to the homogeneous nation-state. (Mudde 2007, pp. 19–26).

[5] The discourse analysis was conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation "Populismus in Ostmitteleuropa" (2023). Only selected results and examples are presented in this article.

Ideological and Contextual Flexibility of Populism

The differences between populisms in Slovakia and Austria become well visible when looking at, for example, their country-specific political discourses on the "refugee crisis"[6] (2015–2018). The refugee crisis in Europe drew the attention of a broad public to populism. Many populist parties across Europe instrumentalized the refugee crisis to mobilize voters and achieved considerable success. Using populist discursive frames, they created the enemy images of refugees, Muslims, and "the establishment" and contrasted them with the victim image of the "good" people. The populists fuelled fears of foreigners and "Islamization" and spread xenophobic and Eurosceptic sentiments in society. In this context, the media reported a pan-European wave of right-wing populists.[7] The argument about the expansion of right-wing populism suggested that the populists in Western and Eastern European countries represent the same populism.

With their appeals to the people, their attacks on the political establishment, and the xenophobic agitation against refugees and Muslims, the European populists indeed appeared the same. Thus, the populists from the Austrian *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ), the Slovak Smer, *Freedom and Solidarity* (SaS), *We Are One Family* (SR), or the *Slovak National Party* (SNS) could easily be equated. They all used the enemy image of "evil" and "dangerous" foreigners, presented as a threat to the security of the locals, their culture, and socio-economic prosperity. The populists staged themselves as protectors of the people and the nation-state and defamed the "evil" domestic and EU establishment. On the level of populist content, there was a broad consensus among the European populists. However, a closer look reveals that the populisms differ significantly from each other.

In Western European countries, there is usually only one politically relevant populist party facing a relatively stable bloc of established, basically non-populist mainstream parties.[8] In Austria, for example, the right-wing populist FPÖ has been the hegemon among populists for decades. It is the only politically relevant, clearly populist party in Austria. The established non-populist mainstream parties include the *Social Democratic Party of Austria* (SPÖ) and *Austrian People's Party* (ÖVP), as well as *The Greens* (GRÜNE) and *The New Austria and Liberal Forum* (NEOS). In contrast, there is not just one politically relevant populist party in Slovakia, but several. The populists operate synchronously side by side and have various ideological and programmatic profiles. Populism in Slovakia is therefore not "right-wing populism", as is often the case in Western Europe, but instead, we see here several ideologically heterogeneous populisms.

Smer, for example, presents itself as a "classic left-wing" and social democratic party (Smer, n. d.) and is a member of the *Party of European Socialists* (PES) in the European Parliament.

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[6]   The quotation marks indicate the critical distance to the term „refugee crisis" and emphasize its constructed character. The term was constructed by the media during the refugee movements in 2015 and later established in public discourse. It stigmatizes refugees as a crisis and problem group. For better readability, quotation marks are omitted in the further text.

[7]   See as examples of such framing the newspaper articles by Kokot (2018), Mounk (2017), or Müller-Plotnikow (2017).

[8]   „Mainstream parties" refer to electorally successful, non-extremist, i.e., centre-left and centre-right parties that regularly participate in governing coalitions (see Meguid 2005, p. 348, fn. 5; Vries – Hobolt 2012, p. 250).

For years, it was the only politically relevant left-wing party in Slovakia.[9] The actual political and discursive behaviour of Smer sharply contradicts the party's official ideology and program. Since its founding in 1999, the Slovak Social Democrats have often behaved in a populist manner. The issues framed populistically and the ideas the populist antagonisms were built on have varied depending on the current issues and power-political relations. In the 2000s (especially during the coalition with the SNS and the HZDS) the populist agitation was primarily directed against the Roma and Hungarian minority living in Slovakia (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 19–21, 31). In the wake of the refugee crisis from 2015 onward, migrants, Muslims, refugees, and the EU became the new essential content of Smer's populism. Róbert Fico, then prime minister and head of the Social Democrats, accused the EU of "blackmail" (*Aktuality*, 28.6.2018) and "dictation" (*Aktuality*, 9.11.2015) for allegedly "forcing" Slovakia to accept refugees (*Strana-smer.sk*, 13.2.2016). Fico described the refugees as dangerous terrorists (*TA3*, 27.5.2015). He stoked fears of foreign invasion by Muslims and staged himself as the defender of national traditions, values and culture from "the foreigners" (*Aktuality*, 25.5.2016). Here one should note that Slovakia was by no means confronted with a real refugee crisis, i.e., with the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees, as was the case, for example, in neighbouring Austria. Populists like those from Smer created a crisis through their discursive practice, although the facts showed a different picture. Overall, it can be argued that Smer is an established left-wing party that opportunistically uses populist discursive frames, exploiting and mobilizing ethnonationalist, xenophobic, Islamophobic or Eurosceptic resentments, depending on the current context. Unlike most European populists, the party does not present itself as a political outsider or contrast itself with an "evil" establishment because its 20-year political career at the centre of power has made it part of the political establishment.

Another variant of populism in Slovakia is represented by the *Slovak National Party* (SNS), one of the oldest politically relevant parties in Slovakia. Its ideology is based on ethnic nationalism, and its dominant theme since the party's reestablishment in 1990 has been the defence of the interests, values, and traditions of the Slovak nation. In the 1990s and 2000s, the SNS focused on the "defence" of Slovaks against the Hungarian and Roma minorities living in Slovakia, as well as against the "West" and the EU, which were discursively constructed as enemies of the Slovak people (Učeň 2009, pp. 30 f.; Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 19–21, 30–32). In terms of ideology and political program, unlike the Smer, the SNS resembles the Western European right-wing populist parties with which it cooperates in the European Parliament and in various bi- and multilateral partnerships.[10] During the refugee crisis, the SNS was one of the most radical producers of the populist interpretative frames through which the „foreigners" and the EU were portrayed as enemies and the „good" Slovak people as their victims (see, e.g., Danko,

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[9]   In 2020, several prominent Smer members around Peter Pellegrini left the party and founded *Voice – Social Democracy* (Hlas), which today is considered another politically relevant left-wing party alongside Smer.

[10] In 2009, the SNS, elected to the European Parliament (EP) for the first time, joined in the EP the political group *Europe of Freedom and Democracy* (EFD), which included members from Eurosceptic, national conservative and right-wing populist parties (e.g., True Finns, Lega Nord, UKIP). In 2011, it formed a partnership agreement to "deepen the friendship and cooperation" with the Austrian right-wing populist FPÖ (FPÖ: Partnerschaft mit slowakischer SNS abgeschlossen 2011).

TA3, 28.2.2016; Danko, *TA3*, 12.1.2015). Although the SNS has been regularly elected to parliament since the 1990s[11] and has participated in governing coalitions several times (1992–1994, 1994–1998, 2006–2010, 2016–2020), it uses anti-establishment appeals and distances itself from "classical" politicians as "the only party" that sincerely defends the interests of the Slovak nation-state and its citizens (see, e.g., Slota, *Sme*, 21.10.2011; Slota, *Sme*, 15.11.2011; Lubyová, *Aktuality*, 15.10.2017; Danko, *TA3*, 12.1.2015).

In the refugee discourse, *Freedom and Solidarity* (SaS) formed a discursive coalition with the Social Democrats and the right-wing SNS. At the time, the SaS was one of the central producers of the Eurosceptic and xenophobic populist discursive frames and narratives. This is paradoxical since the SaS is considered a moderate right-wing, economically liberal, or neoliberal party in both academia and everyday life (Leška 2013, p. 84). When it was founded in 2010, the party positioned itself as liberal in terms of economic as well as socio-political orientation and committed itself to the principles of equality, tolerance, human rights, freedom, and secularism. Among other things, it advocated the legalization of marijuana and LGBT rights (CEEIdentity National Identities, n. d.; Marušiak 2017, p. 189). During the refugee crisis, however, party members, especially party leader Richard Sulík, the dominant figure in the SaS, acted in a xenophobic and Islamophobic manner. This massively countered the party's declared liberal value base. For example, Sulík accused Western European politicians who advocated refugee aid of naiveté and exaggerated humanitarianism (*Aktuality*, 4.8.2015; *TA3*, 28.2.2016) and vehemently rejected the admission of refugees, arguing that Muslim migrants would alienate and overwhelm Slovak and European culture and that they are potential terrorists (*Aktuality*, 6.6.2017). The SaS election campaign in 2016 was dominated by populist agitation against the EU, "the West", migrants, and Muslims, although the party had not paid attention to the issue of immigration or Islam before "the crisis". The original liberal agenda faded into marginality and was replaced by the current issues. Although the party's official ideology and political program remain moderate and factually formulated, the refugee discourse clearly showed that the SaS tactically applies populist instruments to mobilize voters while sharply deviating from its ideological foundations.

We are family – Boris Kollár (SR), founded in 2015 by the entrepreneur Kollár, represents another variant of populism in Slovakia. The party communicated during the refugee crisis similarly to Smer, SNS, SaS, and the right-wing populists from the Austrian FPÖ. They all interpreted the complex socio-political situation through the polarizing populist interpretive frames and reduced it to the binary antagonisms of "good" people vs. "evil" foreigners or "good" people vs. "evil" elites. In terms of ideology and political program, however, the populists differ from one another. As already shown, Smer, SaS and SNS represent entirely different agendas, and so is the case with the party *We are family.* It officially advocates Christian conservative values and the protection of "the traditional" family (Mikušovič 2015a, 2015b). When the SR was founded in 2015, it declared its primary goal to be helping people and families in need. At the time, the party's leader Kollár distinguished himself from the establishment because, unlike "politicians", he would "think with the heart". Looking at the name of the party as well as the official party

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[11]   The SNS has been elected to the national parliament six times since 1992. It failed to pass the 5-percent threshold in the 2002, 2012 and 2020 parliamentary elections.

program, socio-political issues still seem to be at the centre of the party agenda (see *Sme rodina* party program 2020). In contrast, the party's political and discursive behaviour was Eurosceptic and xenophobic during the refugee discourse. Kollár used very radical and pejorative rhetoric for the fact that SR is actually a moderate mainstream party. The party leader accused Brussels of "dictation" and supremacy (*Aktuality*, 4.5.2016) and described refugees as dangerous Muslims, potential terrorists (*TA3*, 21.2.2016), and primitive, uncivilized people (Facebook, 3.5.2016).

As a classic business-firm party, the SR is a political project of its founder, in this case, Boris Kollár; it is centralized around him, possesses a weak level of institutionalization, has only weak regional structures as well as a membership base, and no authentic ideology. Instead of a coherent ideology, it presents flexible positions and an agenda that is being adapted according to the current mood in society (for business-firm parties, see Hopkin – Paolucci 1999, pp. 332–334). The party's leader Kollár deliberately refuses to define his party ideologically. According to him, it is neither left nor right (Kollár je pre svoje opatrenia […] 2017; Marušiak 2017, p. 193 f.). The SR presents itself as a close-to-the-people "movement" and distances itself from "standard politicians" whom it defames as an alienated, self-serving, corrupt establishment. Kollár, for example, contrasted himself with other politicians in his campaign for the 2016 parliamentary election as a "non-politician" who makes policy "for the people".[12] The anti-establishment rhetoric was significantly tempered after the SR joined the governing coalition in 2020.

The examples demonstrate the diversity of populisms and ideological heterogeneity of populist parties in Slovakia, as well as the general flexibility of populism in terms of content. Although the Smer, SNS, SaS, and SR all advocated the same positions in the refugee discourse and used the same interpretative frames, their ideologies, programs, and party structures differ significantly. The examples thus suggest why the argument of spreading pan-European right-wing populism, which was widespread during the refugee crisis, was misleading: populism in Slovakia cannot be captured as "right-wing populism", nor can it be equated with populism in Western European political landscapes such as Austria. In the case of Austrian populism, we can speak of right-wing populism because the FPÖ has been considered a right-wing populist party since the 1980s at the latest (Fallend et al. 2018; Pelinka 2017, pp. 171 f.), and it is the only politically relevant populist party in Austria (Pelinka 2019, pp. 133 f.). The positions the FPÖ has advocated for decades and its discursive behaviour correspond to the core elements of right-wing populism. These include nationalism, xenophobia, Euroscepticism, anti-elitism, and the glorification of the people and popular sovereignty.[13] Unlike in most Western European countries, where only one politically relevant populist party, usually a right-wing populist party, faces a bloc of established non-populist mainstream parties (e.g., FPÖ vs. SPÖ, ÖVP, GRÜNE and NEOS in Austria), in Slovakia several ideologically heterogeneous politically relevant populist parties operate side by side synchronously.

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[12] In the campaign for the 2016 parliamentary elections, Kollár also promoted his party with poster slogans such as „I don't vote for politicians, I vote for Boris" (Sme rodina – Boris Kollár 2016a) or „You can believe me. I am not a politician" (Sme rodina – Boris Kollár 2016b).

[13] On the ideological core elements of right-wing populism, see Geden 2007, pp. 8–11; Decker 2004, pp. 29–33; on the FPÖ as a right-wing populist party, see Pelinka 2002, pp. 284–286.

The above examples also indicate that the ideological anchoring of political parties in Slovakia is unstable and shallow. This can be considered a characteristic of post-socialist party landscapes. Frequent party splits, new party formations, and party collapses are typical, which blurs the programmatic-organizational structures of the parties as well as the differences between their political programs and ideologies. Party systems in East-Central Europe are generally more unstable and fluid than in Western European democracies (Heinisch 2008, pp. 51 f). Party programs play a rather minor role in political reality and everyday political life. The ideological orientation of the parties is not crucial for the functioning of the party system. More than ideology or party program, the top candidates of the parties – mostly their chairmen – play an essential role in the election as well as in political decisions (Formánková – Lorenz 2019, pp. 580–589; on the post-socialist party landscapes, see Kostelecký 2002, pp. 162–167; Lang 2009, pp. 239–243, 258–262).

The differences in party systems and political landscapes between Eastern and Western European countries become evident in the different expressions of populism. For example, populist (as well as general political) parties in Slovakia mostly do not have a stable, coherent ideology or a stable political agenda. In contrast, the Austrian FPÖ has held the same ideological positions for decades. The party has also interpreted the same issues (e.g., immigration, the alleged corruption of the ÖVP and SPÖ and their alienation from the people) with the populist frames and constructed the same populist friend-foe images ("good" people vs. "evil" establishment, "evil" EU, "evil" immigrants and Muslims) (on the ideology of the FPÖ see Belafi 2017, pp. 371–374; Pelinka 2017, pp. 172 f.; Pelinka 2019, pp. 138–140). The ideological positions and the issues that are populistically framed are less fixed in the case of Slovak populists. They choose and adapt ideologies and agendas more opportunistically. The ideological heterogeneity and variability of populism thus prove to be particularly pronounced in Slovakia.

The Political Relevance of Populism

As in other East-Central European states, populists in Slovakia operate at the centre of political power rather than on the periphery, regularly forming governments and influencing politics at the highest level. In Hungary, for example, Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* has led the government since 2010. In Poland, the populist *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) has been the most popular party, and in government since 2015. The ruling populists are gradually transforming these countries' political regimes into illiberal democracies.[14] The high relevance of populism is related to the fact that there is usually not only one politically relevant populist party in the East-Central European countries but several. In Slovakia, for example, all political parties elected to the national parliament, except for Most-Híd, behaved populistically during the refugee crisis: Smer, SNS, SaS, SR, ĽSNS, and OĽaNO, they all interpreted the refugee crisis with the populist discursive frames, creating the populist friend-foe antagonisms of „good" native people on the one hand

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[14] On populism and illiberalism in Poland and Hungary, see the issue of the journal *Osteuropa* "Unterm Messer. Der illiberale Staat in Ungarn und Polen" (Vol. 68, No. 3/5, 2018).

and „evil" foreigners, „evil" EU or „evil" Western elites on the other. In the neighbouring Czech Republic, too, the majority of parliamentary parties (especially ODS, ČSSD, SPD, and ANO) and central decision-makers, including President Miloš Zeman, used populist discursive frames and stoked fears of „dangerous", culturally „alien and threatening" and „socially parasitic" refugees.[15]

Before the European refugee crisis, foreigners and Muslims had played a marginal role in Slovak political discourse. In Western Europe, they had been a major issue for right-wing populists since the 1980s (Decker – Lewandowsky 2017). In contrast, in Eastern Europe, nationalist and national-populist mobilization before 2015 was directed against the ethnic minorities who had lived in these countries for decades (Buštíková 2018, p. 567). In Slovakia, the most critical minority problem in terms of political impact since the 1990s concerned the ethnic Hungarians (Magyars) (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 19–21), who are the largest ethnic minority in the country with 422,065 people (Szalay – Kerekes 2022). The so-called Hungarian question has led to emotional bilateral political disputes, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, and played a significant role on the agenda of several Slovak parties as well as governments. For years, the HZDS, SNS, and Smer, in particular, instrumentalized the Hungarian question to mobilize voters (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 9–12, 19 ff.; Pänke 2010, pp. 3 f.). In this context, the neighbouring state of Hungary was constructed as an external enemy that threatened Slovakia's sovereignty as a nation-state. It was accused of wanting to „appropriate" the members of the Hungarian minority living in southern Slovakia, including the territory of southern Slovakia. Slovak citizens of Magyar descent as well as their political representatives, the parties SMK and Most-Híd, were defamed as disloyal and traitorous. They were portrayed as internal „enemies" of the „good" people, which meant, in this case, the community of the Slovak majority defined in a nativist fashion.[16] The Smer-SNS-HZDS coalition under the Social Democrat Róbert Fico (2006–2010) even implemented several restrictive measures against ethnic minorities (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová – Smilov 2008; p. 130). In 2009, for example, a controversial law on the state language was implemented that made Slovak the mandatory language in all government offices, schools, theatres, and other public spaces. Slovaks of Magyar origin were only allowed to use their native language in public institutions in communities where at least 20 percent were ethnic Hungarians. Violations were punished with drastic fines (Erdei 2009; Slowakei setzt auf […] 2009). This illustrates that populism does not remain on the discursive level but influences practical political steps.

The political relevance and widespread use of populism in Slovakia also become apparent when looking at the discourse on the Roma minority. A large part of the Slovak population keeps a high social distance from the minority (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 30–32; Kneuer et al. 2015, p. 4). Politicians' communication strategies toward voters reflect the social antipathy toward Roma. On the one hand, mainstream parties avoid taking positions that could be interpreted as too friendly toward the minority because they fear losing voters in the majority

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[15] On the positioning of Slovak parties in the refugee discourse, see Hlinčíková – Mesežnikov 2016; Mesežnikov – Bútorová 2018; on the Czech refuge discourse, see Novotná 2017; Jungwirth 2018.

[16] On the national-populist framing of the Hungarian question, see Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 19–30.

population. On the other hand, extremist, as well as moderate political forces, have been using the widespread anti-Roma sentiments to mobilize voters since the 1990s, turning them into enemies of the „good" majority community through the antagonistic populist interpretive frames (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 30–32; Kneuer et al. 2015, p. 4).

Of politically relevant parties, the *Slovak National Party* represented the most radical attitudes toward Roma in the 1990s and 2000s (Mesežnikov – Gyárfášová 2008, pp. 30–32). In the 2010s, the party *Kotlebians – People's Party Our Slovakia* (ĽSNS) gained political prominence and overtook the SNS in radicalism (Kluknavská – Smolík 2016). In contrast to ĽSNS or SNS, moderate mainstream parties from both the left and right spectrum avoid overt racism, but at the same time, they do not offer non-populist alternative interpretive frames. Instead, they mainly reproduce populist friend-foe antagonisms and popular prejudices against Roma. Their proposed solutions to the problems with the Roma minority reflect the securitization of the issue and the reproduction of stereotypes about Roma (see, e.g., Glovičko 2012; Kopcsayová 2012; Krempaský 2010; Lajčáková 2011, pp. 1 f.), which are typical for the Slovak political discourse. For example, in the 2010 and 2012 election campaigns for the national parliament, all politically relevant parties (KDH, SaS, SDKÚ, and Smer) called for increased police presence in Roma settlements and emphasized that the access to social benefits (e.g., family allowances, unemployment benefits) should be more strictly regulated so that the benefits are not abused but "earned" (Smer a SDKÚ sa zhodli […] 2010; Ako Rómov vidia strany 2010; Glovičko 2012). In this way, the politicians subliminally reproduced the prejudices of "dangerous", "criminal", and "socially parasitic" Roma, even though they avoided open hostility or radical rhetoric. Non-populist discursive opposition in the Slovak Roma discourse remains very weak. Political discourse lacks non-populist discursive frames that would not portray Roma as "enemies" of the majority society or describe them one-sidedly as the cause of the problems.

The discursive dominance of the populists and their exceptional political significance in Slovakia become even clearer from a comparative perspective. Austria, for example, has one of the most successful right-wing populist parties in Europe, the FPÖ. Under the charismatic leaders Jörg Haider and Heinz-Christian Strache, the Austrian right-wing populists pushed their way into the centre of political power and even took part in the national governments. However, neither the Austrian discourse on the refugee crisis nor earlier discourses on foreigners were dominated by the populists. Austrian discourses always take the form of discursive struggles between strong populist narratives promoted by the FPÖ and possibly its ideologically related splinter parties (e.g., the BZÖ or TS)[17] on the one hand, and strong non-populist narratives used by the established mainstream parties on the other. For decades, these have traditionally included the *Social Democratic Party of Austria* (SPÖ), *Austrian People's Party* (ÖVP), *The Greens* (GRÜNE) and, more recently, the *New Austria and Liberal Forum* (NEOS), founded in 2013. While both coun-

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[17] The party *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* (BZÖ, Alliance for the Future of Austria) was formed in 2005 when numerous members split from the FPÖ and founded the BZÖ and was represented in the national parliament from 2006 to 2013. In 2013, the party failed to enter the parliament with 3.5 percent and lost political importance in the following years. *Team Stronach* (TS), founded in 2012 by entrepreneur Frank Stronach, entered the Austrian parliament in 2013 with 5.7 percent. In 2012, several BZÖ deputies defected to the TS. In 2017, the TS disbanded.

tries show strong populist discourse, the non-populist discursive opposition, which counteracts the populists in the discursive as well as the political field, proves much more robust in Austria than in Slovakia.

In Slovakia, even established mainstream parties regularly use populist discursive frames, tactically adopting ideological positions that fit the current social atmosphere. For example, the SaS and the SR, which had no xenophobic or Islamophobic features before 2015, adopted radical xenophobic and racist positions during the refugee crisis and offensively used populist interpretive frames. Another example is the Smer. At the beginning of the 2010s, the party presented itself as clearly "pro-European". Even during the euro crisis, which gave rise to a strong populist Eurosceptic discourse, it advocated common European solutions, appealed to shared European values and cohesion, and showed a deep trust in the EU's decisions and institutions (Fico, *Sme*, 12.10.2011; Fico, *Aktuality*, 12.5.2010; Kaliňák, *TA3*, 27.6.2010). Then, during the refugee crisis, it acted as a radically Eurosceptic party, criticizing the "dictate", "blackmail" and "incompetence" of the EU, which allegedly "forced" Slovakia to accept refugees. The aforementioned parties apparently adapted their agendas as well as their ideological positions to the social atmosphere. Since the moderate left-wing and right-wing established parties in Slovakia themselves use populist discursive frames, opportunistically slipping away from their official ideologies, the non-populist discursive opposition tends to prove weak and unstable. The relevance of populism in political discourse as well as in everyday politics is therefore very strong in Slovakia.

Graduality and Non-Binarity of Populism

Populism is generally a gradual and non-binary phenomenon. In Slovakia, however, these characteristics are particularly visible. This is because it is impossible to distinguish between *the* populist and *the* non-populist parties (non-binarity) since established mainstream parties also behave populistically. As a result, as mentioned above, several populist actors operate side by side here, with the radicality, intensity as well as content of their populist statements varying (graduality). The distinction between populist and non-populist parties or between "the establishment" and "the populists" is generally more difficult in East-Central European countries than in Western Europe. The reason for this may be found in their more volatile, dynamic party system structures, "with periodic regrouping and reshuffling, shifting alliances, breakups, and the constant arrival of new players" (Heinisch 2008, pp. 51 f).

The fact that populism can have various nuances, forms, and intensities becomes apparent when looking at the populists in Slovakia. There are parties like the SNS, which has been using populist discursive frames intensively and permanently for decades and can therefore be clearly classified as national populists. However, there are also parties such as the moderate right-wing mainstream party *Freedom and Solidarity* (SaS), which, for the most part, pursues its economic-liberal agenda in a problem-oriented manner and argues factually, however, it also selectively employs populist instruments to mobilize voters. During the euro crisis (from 2009), for example, it was the most active producer of Eurosceptic populist narratives. In the discourse on

the refugee crisis (from 2015), it actively created and disseminated xenophobic and Eurosceptic populist friend-foe antagonisms.

Another example that illustrates the non-binarity and graduality of populism is the Christian Democratic, economically liberal SDKÚ, which was considered an established, basically non-populist mainstream party with a clear ideology and distinct programmatic orientation for years. In minority discourses, it did not behave populistically; in debates on EU issues, it traditionally took pro-European positions and challenged the populist Eurosceptic narratives that were then primarily propagated by the SNS (Maxiánová 2003, pp. 66, 68–72). However, prominent members of the SDKÚ used the populist friend-foe framing when interpreting the euro crisis in 2010, depicting EU politicians and Greece as enemies of the "good" and "poor" Slovaks. They criticized, for example, the bailouts to crisis-hit countries in Southern Europe as false, perverse solidarity "of the poor towards the rich" (Mikloš, *TA3*, 12.9.2010; Janiš, *RTVS*, 8.5.2010), and accused the EU of selective solidarity and unequal treatment among the EU members. Slovakia was portrayed as a victim and loser of the euro bailout policies and contrasted with allegedly privileged crisis-ridden countries, the supposed winners of the EU policies (Mikloš, *TA3*, 9.5.2010). The SDKÚ politicians interpreted the Greek debt crisis as a consequence of the irresponsible "debt policies" (Mikloš, *TA3*, 9.5.2010), "lies", and "populism" (Janiš, *RTVS*, 8.5.2010) of the governments there. Very often, not only Greek politicians but also "the Greeks" in general were blamed for the Greek and euro crisis because they allegedly "lived beyond their means" (Mikloš, *TA3*, 9.5.2010). This framing suggested that the "profligate" Greeks caused the crisis themselves and therefore deserved no help from the "responsible" states, which apparently included Slovakia. The normative contrast between the "good" responsible states and the "bad" profligate Greeks played a central role in the argumentation against the bailout packages, which SDKÚ strictly rejected in its campaign before the 2010 parliamentary elections (see, e.g., Mikloš, *TA3*, 12.9.2010; Dzurinda, *Pravda*, 23.8.2010; Radičová, *Sme*, 22.5.2010). This framing morally demarcated Greece from the "good" Slovakia, the "poorest state in the Eurozone" (Janiš, *RTVS*, 8.5.2010; see also Mikloš, *TA3*, 9.5.2010). The SDKÚ, which was in opposition at the time, also sharply criticized the attitudes of the ruling Smer, which supported the euro bailouts (see, e.g., Janiš, *RTVS*, 8.5.2010). In this way, in addition to the external enemies – Greece and the EU – an internal enemy, the Smer, was also created.

After the 2010 parliamentary elections, the SDKÚ took over the government under Prime Minister Iveta Radičová. The party's attitudes, argumentation, and interpretative frames changed considerably with its transition from opposition to the government. After the power political reshuffle, the governing SDKÚ continued to oppose the bilateral aid program to Greece, but it toned down its criticism and rhetoric. The SDKÚ now supported Slovakia's participation in the temporary (EFSF) and permanent bailout (ESM), although it had previously criticized the bailout programs. Considering the offensive criticism of the Greek aid program in the 2010 election campaign, SDKÚ's approval of the further bailout measures was paradoxical (see Rogalska 2011, pp. 59 f.). The SDKÚ case illustrates that even established mainstream parties opportunistically and situationally (e.g., during election campaigns) use populist discursive instruments when it benefits them.

In Western European democracies, such as Austria, it is usually easier to distinguish between populist and non-populist parties. This is related to the observation that the established mainstream parties in Western European countries have a more stable, authentic ideological anchoring than parties in post-socialist countries. They do not suddenly become – due to the changed power-political situation or socio-political atmosphere – radical populists who fuel the currently popular friend-foe images. In the Austrian discourse on the refugee crisis, for example, the established mainstream parties SPÖ, ÖVP, GRÜNE, or NEOS did not agitate against refugees, the EU, or Muslims or adopted xenophobic positions, drifting away from their ideologies. In contrast, almost all politically relevant parties in Slovakia (Smer, SaS, SR, SNS, ĽSNS) placed immigration and Islam at the centre of their agendas and election campaigns, although they had not previously paid attention to the issues and became radical populists. Under the influence of public mood, they adopted xenophobic and racist positions that, in most cases, contradicted their official ideologies.

At the same time, it cannot be claimed that there is a *cordon sanitaire* between populists and non-populists in Western Europe. The case of Austria demonstrates this perfectly. During the refugee crisis, some prominent SPÖ and ÖVP politicians resorted to populist discursive frames and advocated restrictive solutions, which is why critical observers accused them of a shift to the right or right-wing populism (see, e.g., Rheindorf – Wodak 2019, p. 117; Wodak 2018). In particular, the bold statements and tough positions of Minister for Foreign Affairs, Europe and Integration (2013–2017) and Federal Chancellor (2017–2021) Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) triggered critical reactions among the liberal public (see, e.g., Lackner 2017; Meschede 2017; Sebastian Kurz, ein Rechtspopulist? 2017). With his statements, the hardliner Kurz often came close to FPÖ politicians in terms of rhetoric as well as content. The former ÖVP party leader (2017–2021) called, for example, for a "massive" reduction in "illegal migration", "a closure of the Mediterranean migrant route" (*Die Presse*, 19.6.2017; *Der Standard*, 3.9.2016; *Krone*, 10.8.2017), a "stop to immigration into our social system" (*Twitter*, 25.9.2017) and advocated a ban on burqas in Austria (*Die Presse*, 24.1.2017).

The examples from Slovakia and Austria demonstrate the non-binary and gradual nature of populism. They illustrate that in political reality there is no clear distinction between populist and non-populist parties. However, the dividing line is more evident in Western Europe's more stable and predictable party systems than in the dynamic and fluid political landscapes of post-socialist East Central Europe. The examples from Slovakia and Austria illustrate this difference quite well. The extent and radicality to which mainstream parties in Slovakia, on the one hand, and in Austria, on the other, use populist discursive frames differ significantly. This is also why populism tends to be more widespread in the political spectrum of post-socialist countries than in Western European democracies.

Conclusion

The flexibility and variability of content and ideology, the strong political relevance, and the great variety of nuances and forms are distinctive features of populism in Slovakia. These

characteristics are not exclusive to Slovakia, as they can also be observed in other Eastern and Western European countries. However, as the comparison of Slovak and Austrian populisms showed, their intensity and expression vary depending on the political context. For example, the political significance of populism and its influence on everyday politics are stronger in Slovakia than in Austria, where politics has been dominated for decades, not by the right-wing populists from the FPÖ or its related splinter parties, but primarily by the SPÖ and ÖVP. Non-binarity and graduality are inherent to populism and thus generally valid. However, at the same time, they are particularly pronounced in Slovakia, where the line between populist and non-populist parties is very fluid.

The differences between the forms and the functioning of populism in post-socialist East-Central Europe, on the one hand, and in Western Europe, on the other, are rooted in their different political experiences and the associated political-institutional frameworks. The party systems and political cultures in post-socialist states differ from those in Western European countries that did not experience state socialism and whose democracies and party systems took much longer to form and were shaped by different processes and contextual conditions. Such differences are reflected in the different content, manifestations, and spread of populism in the political spectrum. Therefore, research on populism should always consider the historical and political-institutional context in which populists operate. The case of Slovakia shows that historical traumas such as Magyarization in the Habsburg monarchy, the inferiority complex during the First Czechoslovak Republic, or the manifold legacies of state socialism influence the current manifestations of populism – its content, functioning, and political relevance.

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