**Radical Populism in Slovakia in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered one of the biggest crises that countries in Europe have experienced since the Second World War. It is precisely in times of crisis that populist parties grow. The aim of our article is to find out how Slovak left-wing and right-wing populists communicated in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are interested in what topics the populists emphasized as their priorities and what means of expression they used in communicating with their voters. We thus approach radical populism as a mode of political communication. A number of authors define populism as a simplistic style of communication that reduces complex political issues to the responsibility of 'guilty parties' and political competition to the opposition of friend and foe. Thus, the question remains who was the enemy of Slovak radical populists in the period under study.

*Keywords: populism, Slovakia, COVID-19 pandemic, discourse*

**Introduction**

Populism is not a new phenomenon in Slovakia. On the contrary, political parties have used populism as a communication strategy to varying degrees since the regime transition in 1989 and the beginning of the formation of a competitive party system [1]. In the early 1990s, populism was influenced by aggressive nationalism. After the division of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, political discourse was dominated by social demagogy. In 2015 and 2016, public discourse was marked by strong anti-immigration appeals [2]. Populists constantly presented simple solutions to complex problems, perceiving some groups of society as undesirable (first some autochthonous, later allochthonous minorities), and this led to a significant polarization of society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the way how politicians speak since its emergence in 2020. Anti-pandemic measures, including vaccination, have also become a central topic of public discourse in Slovakia since the first case of COVID-19. Two years later, as the number of severe cases of the disease declined, the debate on COVID-19 was replaced by the debate about the war in Ukraine. Once again, we have witnessed a discourse in which politicians used the betrayal of the nation, the loss of sovereignty, and the emotion of fear to mobilise the electorate. Various conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus, the influence of George Soros on Slovak foreign policy-making, and also about African refugees from Ukraine appeared in the discourse.

The object of the research is the communication strategies of a selected group of political actors in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic between the years 2020 and 2022. The article aims to find out what communication strategies have been used by radical populists in this period. We are interested in the expressive means they have used in communicating with the electorate to highlight their programmatic priorities. We thus approach radical populism as a method of political communication. Many authors define populism as a simplistic style of communication that reduces complex political issues to the responsibility of 'culprits' and political competition to the contrast of friend with the enemy. The question, therefore, remains who is the enemy of Slovak radical populists in the period under study.

Among the representatives of the radical right, we analyse the communication of the members of Kotleba´s party – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS), and the representatives of the political party Republika. From the far left of the ideological spectrum, we examine the statements of the representatives of the Smer-SD party. Despite the fact that in the case of Smer-SD on the one hand and ĽSNS and Republika on the other hand, they are ideologically distant party formations that stand at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, their common feature is a populist style of expression treading the line between radicalism and extremism.

Since we are examining political communication in a particular period, we focus on the topic of the coronavirus, or more precisely on the COVID-19 pandemic. First of all, we are interested in how radical populists defended their views on the pandemic, the Slovak government's anti-pandemic measures, as well as on the vaccination against the disease.

**Methodology**

In the research, we used discourse analysis of excerpted political texts which were published from the outbreak of the pandemic COVID-19, to be more precise from March 2020 to April 2022. We understand discourse from the perspective of Irina Dulebova "as the total of all speech acts used in political debates, as well as the rules of public policy, verified by tradition and experience" [3]. Thus, what is important is not a particular topic, but particular actors of political discourse. In the research, we used an analysis of political discourse in the form of a qualitative analysis of published texts. We focus primarily on the way of communicating political outcomes. We are interested in what and how politicians talk about COVID-19 or topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The corpus of the text under study consists of parliamentary speeches (achieved from the digital archive of the Slovak Parliament), programme documents, and public statements of political actors published in different types of media (print opinion-forming media, social networks, TV debates), or on the websites of various state institutions.

**Populism from the theoretical perspective**

It is indeed questionable whether there is a more frequently used term in politics than the term populism, although as a scientific term it is debatable. Critics are particularly disturbed by its vagueness, and ambiguity [4]. Populism is one of the most contested terms in the social sciences. It is full of paradoxes and competing interpretations. It is precisely the vagueness of populism as a concept and political strategy that makes it both analytically obscure and politically useful [5]. Anton Pelinka argues that there is no clear, universally accepted understanding of populism. Since populism in general and right-wing populism, in particular, have negative connotations, the term also serves as a tool in political debate [6].

When defining the term populism, we meet with the question of whether it is not rather an ideology or a political style, or more precisely a communication strategy [7]. Indeed, the term populism tends to be used to refer to different ideological orientations, concepts, political goals, as well as methods of political communication [6]. According to Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 322), populism is a communicative framework that appeals to people, identifies with them, and pretends to speak on their behalf [8]. Weyland, on the other hand, sees populism as a political strategy through which a charismatic leader exercises power based on the direct, unmediated, non-institutionalized support of a large number of mostly unorganized supporters [9].

In order not to narrow populism down to one particular aspect, we use the insight of the German author Florian Hartleb, who presented four levels of populism [10]:

a) At a technical level, populism is defined as a simplistic style of politics that is oriented towards the public articulation of the wishes of "the people", which is also the subject of scholarly interest.

b) At the level of content, populism manifests itself in critical positions towards the existing government establishment and fixates primarily on topics capable of mobilising the electorate (social demagogy, anti-Americanism, anti-immigration policy). At this level, populism is thus understood primarily as an ideology. Mudde defines populism as an ideology according to which society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' [11]. The basis of this ideology is that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. In the language of the populists, government politicians are corrupt, they are power-hungry. Some authors [11, 12] point out that populism is a "thin ideology" because it is a set of only a few ideas, albeit very specific ones. These ideas are based on the belief that "the political elite is corrupt, the people are a homogeneous and virtuous entity, and unfettered people's sovereignty is the appropriate means to restore lawful order" [13].

c) The personal dimension of populism expresses the presence of a central charismatic personality from which the popularity of the entire party is derived.

d) Finally, the media level is expressed in the intensive use of the means of mass communication [10].

**Causes of the rise of populism**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most intense crises for several European countries since the Second World War. In the context of the relationship between pandemics and populism, Bobba and Hubé draw attention to the debate on the role of crisis situations in the emergence of populist mobilization [14]. As a general rule, this is a debate between two broad groups: those who advocate a direct link between crises and populism, and those who are not sure whether there is a link between the two processes. Michael Zürn, in explaining the reasons for the success of Donald Trump and Brexit supporters, points to their support in structurally weak regions with outdated industries [15]. These regions are populated by people who have been negatively affected by globalisation processes, and they express support for populists as a result of their social insecurity. For it is precisely the populists who criticise the inequalities between social groups, which are constantly being exacerbated by the ongoing process of globalisation. This is despite the fact that populists themselves are often among the winners of these processes.

Looking at Slovak politics, we can conclude that populism has been a part of politics in Slovakia since the beginning of the transition from a non-democratic to a democratic regime, but it has only taken different forms and intensities [16]. From the nationalist populism in the early 1990s, through the strong social demagogy of the national-left entities in the following years. Populism was also used by Slovak politicians immediately before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, right-wing extremists from the ĽSNS won seats in parliament. Boris Kollar's Sme rodina party also got into parliament, and Igor Matovič, with an anti-system party with four members, fully vulgarised political discourse. Another politician, Ľuboš Blaha, a member of parliament for the Smer-SD party, became the most popular Slovak politician on social networks with his down-to-earth verbal discourse.

The causes of populism are rather identified in the institutional shortcomings of political systems. Similarly, the German political scientist Klaus von Beyme sees the main reasons for the emergence of populism in Central and Eastern European countries [17]. Among the main institutional deficiencies, von Beyme includes leader-oriented political parties. In addition to shortcomings in the party system, he sees the reasons for the rise of right-wing populism in Central and Eastern Europe in strong national ideas, authoritarian traditions, and a sense of threat from the superpowers, as well as shortcomings in the process of regime transformation from undemocratic to democratic.

For these reasons, we argue that the rise of radical populism in Slovakia was not an immediate response to the crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, although the consequences of the pandemic deepened the frustration, the sense of powerlessness, and fears about the future of a significant segment of the Slovak population. And since fear and anxiety are the breeding ground for populists, it was to be expected that they would thrive in this period.

**Slovak populism in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the behaviour and the form of expression of Slovak radical politicians. Anti-pandemic measures became a central theme of public discourse, with left-wing and right-wing populists using similar means of communication to underline their negative attitudes toward the government policy during this period. In their criticism, they appealed to the will of the people. Appealing to the will of the people forms the basic core of populism. Without the reference to the people, populism is unthinkable. Through this strategy, populists want to present that they care about the interests of the people, they want to defend the interests of the people above all and they know best what the people want [8].

In the logic of the populists, it is important to put the category of the people (the nation) in sharp contrast with the category of the elite (e.g. the establishment) [18]. The elites act as scapegoats in populist communication strategies and are blamed for all possible negative phenomena in society (price increases, shortages of certain goods and services, migrants, a sense of threat, hatred, corruption, poverty, even the pandemic and everyone who has succumbed to the COVID-19 disease). Populists pose as defenders of the nation (the people) and its supposed will of eventual good, as opposed to the ruling, allegedly corrupt political elite.

This strategy of excoriating the ruling elite was also seen in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The populists gradually changed their approach to the pandemic. First, they questioned the virus as such, then they criticised anti-pandemic diseases (e.g. wearing face masks, restrictions on freedom of movement, assembly, and association), and later they strongly criticised the COVID-19 vaccination.

Based on the analysis of the period under study, we have identified common overlaps between left-wing and right-wing populism, especially in the political vocabulary. Slovak populists, regardless of whether they are left-wing or right-wing populists, use the same strategies (dramatisation, scandalisation, labelling, exaggeration, repetition) and the same expressions. According to Thomas Hoffmann, scandalizing and strongly emotionalizing, negative expressions are characteristic manifestations of populist language [19]. Dramatization and emotional tone are used by populists to emphasize the failure of the elite and the necessity of change. Mudde also refers to the emotional side of populism when he refers to it as "an emotive and simplistic discourse that focuses on people's 'inner feelings'" [11]. They use short sentences with a lot of emotional means to increase the appeal of statements and thus gain more public attention [20].

A particularly popular communication strategy to dramatize the statement of Slovak populists during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic was to compare the current political system with some form of undemocratic regime. One of the most frequent expressions in the language of Slovak political populism, used by different politicians in different contexts and therefore gradually losing its original meaning, is the word fascism. In addition to the term fascism, lexemes associated with one of the non-democratic regimes appear in the language of left-wing and right-wing populism. For example, the terms Hitler, Seizure Act, concentration camps, Nazis, Nazism, Mengele, Nuremberg, Gestapo, Third Reich, etc. The aim of this communication strategy is to give the impression that the current political regime is comparable to that of the German Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s.

One form of dramatisation and exaggeration is the use of the word totalitarianism (the term covid totalitarianism has also appeared), or in the adjective form totalitarian. As in other hyperbolic vehicles of expression, totalitarianism has appeared especially in criticism of anti-pandemic measures.

In the context of vaccination, the term *apartheid* has been extremely popular among left and right-wing populists. The word apartheid (literally meaning separateness) carries a strong negative connotation. Slovak populists used this word to dramatise the measures that the government wanted to use to eliminate the spread of a deadly virus and prevent the collapse of the health system. During the peak of the pandemic, the health care system was so overburdened that not only patients infected with the virus were unable to access health care, but also patients suffering from other serious diagnoses were unable to receive sufficient medical care in time due to bed occupancy and overloaded medical staff.

According to German political extremism expert Uwe Backes [21], "some phenomena and processes are so complicated that some people need certain auxiliary constructions to understand them." The period of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a space for the dissemination of various unverified information, half-truths, or conspiracy theories about how "powerful actors are pursuing a perfidious plan behind the scenes and therefore they manipulate events" [22].

According to Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse [23], but also according to Pfahl-Traughber [24], trusting conspiracy theories and further disseminating them is a characteristic of right-wing radical populists and extremists in particular. Conspiracy theories suit extremists because they fit into the scheme of black-and-white dichotomous views such as friend versus foe, victim versus perpetrator, good versus bad, or "us" and "them" (the other). Conspiracy theories are based on the idea that the world is controlled by the "bad guys" against whom "we" (the good guys) must stand up and defend ourselves. According to Uwe Backes, "those who see themselves as bearers of absolute truths need an explanation for their continued political failures" [21]. A consequence of conspiratorial populists is the emergence of so-called "post-truth politics", in which an excess of information suppresses facts and thus emotions and subjective beliefs dominate public debate instead of factual arguments [25].

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have also experienced a boom in Slovakia. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the representatives of the extremist ĽSNS, in particular, expressed their negative attitude towards vaccination by claiming economic profit for big pharmaceutical companies. They remained consistent in their negative attitude towards vaccination even during the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice of conspiracy theory depended on the stage of the pandemic that society was currently in. Initially, the view was that the coronavirus either didn't exist (Do you know anyone who has coronavirus?) or was just causing a harmless flu-like illness. The images of the first European victims of the viral pandemic coming from Italian regions were supposed to be manipulated.

Various speculations about the origin of the coronavirus have gradually emerged. It was even supposed to be a secret American biological weapon intended against China since it appeared in China first and regardless of the fact that the United States has had the most victims of this virus (CSSE, JHU 2022). Another conspiracy theory was that the purpose of full-scale testing was to "chip" people. Controlling people with chips was also to be behind later vaccinations.

Populists articulate conspiracy theories in two ways. Either they formulate them directly and openly declare the content of what is being said, or they use various means of expression to create the preconditions for the messages to raise doubts in the mind of the recipient. For example, they use particles, i.e. vehicles of expression that convey the politician's subjective attitude to what is being said (supposedly, allegedly, arguably, etc.). They also raise doubts, for example, by not making their statements directly, but by using suggestive questions to get the reader where they want him or her to think of the conspiracy as fact. The advantage of this form of spreading conspiracies, as opposed to the former, is that the disseminator does not have to bluster if someone proves that it is pure nonsense.

The pandemic conspiracies have subsequently developed in the context of the current anti-pandemic measures. Before the right-wing extremists began to contribute their conspiracies to the debate on the vaccination against COVIDU-19, they also regularly enriched the political discourse with various anti-pandemic measures. They became particularly active after the large-scale implementation of a rapid antigen testing system for COVID-19, which they linked to the theory of chipping people. A particularly popular conspiracy theory is the idea that vaccination has been primarily linked to the profits of pharmaceutical companies.

**Conclusion**

Based on our analysis, we can conclude that representatives of both populist ends of the ideological spectrum not only use similar communication strategies but also the same means of expression appear. We have identified them in the populists' attitudes on the topic of the COVID-10 pandemic. The opposition politics was an important factor in the way Smer-SD, ĽSNS, and the extra-parliamentary Republic Party communicated. In the case of the opposition parties, it is understandable that their criticism focuses on the government measures, no matter what the topic is.

Anti-pandemic measures or vaccination have been questioned by both right-wing and left-wing populists. In doing so, they used expressions that gave the impression that these were practices that fulfilled the characteristics of totalitarian regimes. This approach is typical of populists, who tend to label their critics with terms with negative connotations. Thus, they do not question the arguments of the ruling parties but they attempt to challenge the competence of the ruling politicians with arguments from the ad hominem or ad personam category. Regardless of whether they are left-wing or right-wing populists, the expressions are similar or even identical. Words like apartheid, fascism, totalitarianism, and terrorism are present in the language of both right-wing and left-wing radical populism.

These terms are not accidental. The strategy of the populists is to use dramatisation, exaggeration, and constant repetition of the same expressive means of expression to appeal to the emotions of the electorate, create fear and apprehension, and, consequently, convince them that they are the ones who will rid the electorate of fear of imaginary enemies. The evocation of fear and dread is common among populists because fear is considered to be an effective motivator for social action.

Populists questioned first the seriousness of the disease, then some of the anti-pandemic measures, and later vaccination. Raising fear about microchipping through testing and later vaccination appeared in the communication of right-wing populism. Among the hoaxes, the view that vaccination causes mass deaths dominated. At the time of the pandemic, there was an equally frequent belief that vaccination was mainly the work of big pharmaceutical companies, whose interest was primarily economic. There was even the view that the virus was of American origin and was intended to enslave humanity. It was the topic that we identified the scientific scepticism of the radical populists. With their attitudes towards COVID-19 and anti-pandemic measures, they expressed their distrust not only of the political elite but also of doctors, scientists, and experts.

As in the past, after the 2020 parliamentary elections, populists used the conspiracy theory that George Soros, an American financier of Hungarian-Jewish origin, was the cause of all that was wrong in Slovak politics. Soros is being picked as a scapegoat by Slovak populists from both the left and the right-wing.

If we wanted to focus on the differences between the far right and the left, we would find it mainly in the content. The stigmatisation of certain groups is typical of both categories of radical populism, the only difference is which groups are involved. They share the same negative attitude towards the establishment, political and economic elites, and the free media. They also share the same view of anti-Americanism, anti-liberalism, pro-Russian sentiment, the messianic syndrome, and the stylization of the role of the victim.

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