**Nation before democracy? Placing the rise of the Slovak extreme right into context**

**Abstract**

By focusing on the People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), the article systematically explores the political environment in Slovakia in order to best explain the parliamentary breakthrough of this extreme right party that is hostile to representative democracy and is ideologically rooted in wartime authoritarianism. It is argued that the success of the ĽSNS ought to be viewed from the perspective of persistent ethno-nationalist trend in Slovak politics which runs through Slovakia’s national development from pre-communist times to the present. While migration crisis served as an additional catalyst, ethno-nationalism and illiberalism have a longer tradition in post-1989 Slovakia than the presence of the ĽSNS.

**Introduction**

When compared to other Visegrád (V4) countries, particularly Poland and Hungary and to a lesser degree the Czech Republic, Slovakia is considered a functioning democracy and does not take up a prominent place in literature on “democratic backsliding.”1 Yet, the 2016 general election delivered a surprise to the political establishment, public and observers: the extreme right Kotleba - People’s Party Our Slovakia (*Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko*, henceforth ĽSNS) entered the 150 member Slovak parliament with 14 seats after winning 8.04% of the vote. Its electoral victory demonstrated that the cautiously declared success of Slovakia’s post-communist transition to consolidated democracy remains fragile.

With its slogan “One God, One Nation” (*Za Boha, za národ*), the party identifies with the Nazi-sponsored wartime clerico-fascist Slovak State (*Slovenský štát,* 1939-45) which established its own form of Christian National Socialism. It discriminated against all non-Catholic and non-Slovak citizens, and deported its Jewish co-citizens to concentration camps (Henderson 2002, 11-15; Kamenec 1992; Nedelsky 2001). While the wartime Slovak State remains a controversial period in Slovak history (Harris 2002, 93; Nedelsky 2001, 218), evocative of this regime, the ĽSNS official website (<http://www.naseslovensko.net/o-nas/>) declares the party’s three founding principles to be: national, Christian and social (*národný, kresťanský a sociálný*). The ĽSNS openly denies the value of representative democracy (Kazharski 2017, 3) and in its 10-point Manifesto, it promises to protect the fatherland and expel all immigrants who were enforced on Slovakia by the EU, to “protect the public from the growing gypsy terror” and to ensure that Slovakia leaves the EU and NATO ([http://www.naseslovensko.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Volebný-program-2016.pdf](http://www.naseslovensko.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Volebn%C3%BD-program-2016.pdf) ).

This article focuses on the ĽSNS and a wider political environment in Slovakia and its neighbourhood with one overarching aim: to increase our understanding of the rise of this extreme right party. Within this overall aim, while contributing to a rather sparse literature on extremism in Slovakia (Kluknavská and Smolík 2016), the article examines similarities and differences between Slovakia and her neighbours and draws out the wider questions about the rising illiberalism across the region.

In the recent literature Slovakia is often subsumed within Central Europe, whether it comes to “democratic backsliding” (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley 2018), rising illiberalism (Kazaharski 2017; Rupnik 2016; Krastev 2016) or the radical right (Pirro 2014; Mareš and Havlík 2016). When focusing solely on Slovakia, scholarly attention has been given to explanations of voters’ behaviour (Gyárfášová, Bahna and Slosiarik 2017) and the “stable instability” of the party system (Haughton 2014). Haughton on the pages of this journal, argues that the Slovak case highlights the “importance of the past,” but less the communist past and more the pre-communist past, as well as “politics of independence” (Haughton 2014, 211), but does not go into detail about the dynamics of this process. Both the past and independence are inherently linked to appeals to the nation, perception about its identity and ultimately nationalism which is the perspective explored in this article.

Following Minkenberg (2013) who argued that “future studies of right-wing extremism will have to pay more attention to the whole political context of this political movement, instead of being preoccupied with traditional party and electoral studies,” (9) and Pirro ( 2019) who also stresses the “idiosyncrasies of the context,” this article is not focusing on party politics. The contribution of this article rests on the exploration of the socio-political context within which the public became receptive to extremist nationalist appeals of the ĽSNS in the 2016 elections.

According to the current research into extremism in Slovakia (Bútorová and Mesežnikov, 2017) at both public and political party levels shows that the majority of Slovakia’s public are concerned about extremism and hold a very negative image of its supporters. At the same time, the survey shows benevolence toward activities and organisations which underlie extremism and spread its message. Noteworthy is the overall rise of xenophobia and social distance toward practically all minority groups when compared to 2008, particularly Muslims by 41%, immigrants from less developed countries by 38% and Jews 20% (Bútorová and Mesežnikov 2017, 17).

These trends can be explained, but only partially, by the migration crisis of 2015-16. The Slovak mainstream politicians, just as in the neighbouring Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, all responded by playing the national card and engaging in anti-immigrant rhetoric and incitement of fear of terrorism – all supposedly in the name of protecting the culture and safety of the population. It included, but was not limited, to the leading *Smer* party under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Robert Fico who even changed the party’s main campaign slogan from “We work for the people” to “We will defend Slovakia” (Haughton, Malova and Deegan-Krause 2016; Marušiak 2019).

The ĽSNS entered the political scene before the migration crisis, already in 2013 when Mr. Kotleba became the chairman of the Banská Bystrica regional self-government in Central Slovakia (*Banskobystrický kraj*). He and his party suffered a major defeat in the elections to the bodies of self-governing regions in November 2017 by winning only two out of 416 seats (<http://volby.statistics.sk/osk/osk2017/en/data03.html>) . Nevertheless, the continuing support for the ĽSNS (averaging around 10%, according to the *Teraz* website publishing regular results of voters’ preferences by different polling agencies (<http://preferencie.teraz.sk/>) and the 10% support for Mr. Kotleba’s candidature in the first round of presidential elections 16 March 2019 2, necessitates the present analysis. The question I am seeking to answer consists of two parts: how this party gained success in the first place and what were the contributing factors to its breakthrough as a legitimate parliamentary party.

After drawing out the specificities of the party family to which the ĽSNS belongs, I place it within the accepted typologies in the literature on *the far right which incorporates both radical and extreme right* in Eastern and Central Europe*.* All authors concur that the important distinction between radical and extreme actors rest not only on their relationship with liberal democracy, but also on the extent to which these ethnocentric and racist parties are inspired by the right-wing authoritarianism, or fascism of the interwar years. I adopt the same framework here. While the extreme right in Slovakia is a part of a wider European far right trend (Pirro 2015 and 2019), it is also embedded in a broader regional context the exploration of which then follows. I seek to demonstrate that despite Slovakia’s democracy comparing rather well with its neighbours, it struggles to deflect the rise of anti-establishment or even anti-system extremist forces (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, 83). Based on literature, primary and secondary sources and interviews, the article continues with analysis of the political environment in Slovakia. I argue that: a) the success of a party such as ĽSNS ought to be viewed from the perspective of ethno-nationalism, the origins of which go back to pre-communist times and are augmented by communist and post-communist legacies, and only then intensified by the current discontents with liberal values sweeping the whole of the EU; b) there is a persistent ethno-nationalist trend in Slovak politics to which the migration crisis served as an additional catalyst and that illiberal trends have a longer tradition in post-1989 Slovakia than the ĽSNS (Androvičová 2016; Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018; Kazharski 2017, 15; Kluknavská and Smolík 2016).

**Categorising People’s Party Our Slovakia**

The leader of the ĽSNS Marian Kotleba was primarily known as a leader of a neo-Nazi political movement Slovak Togetherness (*Slovenská Pospolitosť,* *SP*). He and his supporters styled themselves and their uniforms on the Hlinka Guard (*Hlinková Garda*), the paramilitary organisation that assisted the leading party of the wartime Slovak state under the name Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party (*Hlinková Slovenská Ľudová* *Strana*, HSĽS). The SP was a part of a whole grouping of movements, associations, paramilitary units, etc. who subscribed to the *Memorandum of the first post-November generation of the Slovak Youth*  (post-November refers to November 1989, the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia).

This movement did not constitute a homogenous unit (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová 2016,18), but they presented a united position at the huge manifestation “For the future of our children” (2009, *Nové Zámky*) which coincided with anti Roma violence organized by SP in the east of the country. The ideological basis of the *Memorandum* was marked by: rejection of liberal-democracy, undermining of fundamental principles of market economy, historical revisionism (which extended to Holocaust denial), anti-minority stance, anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, pan-Slavism, anti-Roma racism, and strong support for Christian values.

The movement was outlawed by the state prosecutor in 2006 and its manifesto deemed a breach of the Slovak Constitution which prevented this movement to ever register as a political party. This did not stop Mr. Kotleba and his sympathizers in their political ambitions. In order to circumvent the law on the formation of political parties and registration of required signatures, they legally acquired an already registered “Friends of vine” party.3 After a number of changes to the name of this defunct party, in 2010, they registered it under its current name *Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko* with Kotleba as its chairman (since 2015 known as Kotleba–*Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko*). According to Pirro ( 2019), the ĽSNS is an example of a “far-right movement party” (788) which draws on prior activities of the *Slovenská Pospolitosť* movement and maintains ideological link with it, thus merging political protest (rallies, street demonstrations, riots) with electoral mobilisation (788). Discarding their paramilitary image and adapting their nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric to active criticism of the Roma, immigrants, the establishment, the EU and NATO, the ĽSNS mobilised enough support to make a breakthrough as a legitimate, if extreme political party (Kluknavska,2016, 336; Kazharski 2017).

The ĽSNS belongs to an ever growing family of political parties placed at the far right wing of the political spectrum which encompasses both radical and extreme right parties. In this article, as in Slovakia,4 the ĽSNS is described as an extreme right party. This categorisation is not without controversy and requires some justification. According to Mudde’s well established work on radical right parties in Europe(2007) and Pirro’s work on Central and Eastern Europe (2015), the primary differentiation between the radical and extreme right rests on their relationship to (liberal) democracy which shifts in ascending order from hostility to rejection. While extreme right is anti-democratic (Mudde, 2007, 23), radical right is merely hostile to some “principles of democratic constitutional order” (Pirro 2015, 3); in other words, extremists, such as the ĽSNS are opposed to the existing democratic system.

In the context of this article, there is a further and rather meaningful distinction. Minkenberg (2017) in an effort to provide conceptual clarification of the post-communist East European radical right, situates the debate between alternate concepts such as fascism, populism, and extremism (5). In the table (4.3, p.74), mapping the major radical right actors in Eastern Europe after 2010, he places Kotleba’s party among extremist right described as fascist-autocratic right, often including racism or xenophobia. Tellingly, the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská Národná Strana*, SNS) appears in the same table as ethnocentrist right with additional explanation as racist or xenophobic right, but excluding fascism. The distinction between the ĽSNS and the SNS is important on two levels. It illustrates the difference between the well-established SNS which while subscribing to the usual far right notions of exclusionary right wing politics has been and currently is a member of the government coalition and the extremist anti-systemic ĽSNS, drawing inspiration from the interwar authoritarianism. Secondly, to Minkenberg and the present author, the far right is a spectrum along which parties with a similar ideological profile shift from radicalism to more or less extremism according to the context within which they seek to mobilise voters’ support.

Similarly, Mareš and Havlík (2016) characterise extreme right parties by “intolerant nationalism, nativism and hard law and order approaches to homeland security” (324). They make a distinction between “traditional” extreme right parties that utilise a history of fascist or authoritarian regimes from the interwar period, reject liberal values and often employ paramilitary or vigilante organisations. According to them “modern” extreme right parties, are not grounded in historical context, are not against liberal democracy *per se*, but focus “primarily on the Roma minority, immigrants and Muslims and emphasise homeland security within a state structure rather than non-state vigilantism” (324).

Slovakia’s ĽSNS combines all “traditional” and “modern” aspects of extreme right. While it shifted from the paramilitary image connected to the wartime fascist state to a more modern politics of extreme right, they have not given up on vigilantism. The party organises vigilante “security patrols” (Bútorová and Mesežnikov 2017, 8; Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, 86) wearing green t-shirts with the party logo who patrol regional trains. They claim on their website under the category ‘our work’ (*naša prá*ca) to “protect decent citizens” against “anti-social criminal elements” (<http://www.naseslovensko.net/kategoria/nasa-praca/hliadky-vo-vlakoch/>).

All far right parties respond to social changes by “radicalising inclusionary and exclusionary criteria of belonging” (Minkenberg 2013, 1), whereby the nation serves as the primary “we” group. In Eastern and Central Europe, the major social changes took place in 1989 which marked not only political and economic transformation, but also a wholesale re-writing of national histories. Mareš and Havlík (2016), Minkenberg (2013) and Zaslove (2011, 21) all suggest that the main distinction between various forms of today’sextremism is the extent to which the post-communist far right is inspired by right-wing authoritarianism, or fascism of the interwar years. In many Central and Eastern European countries there is a history of fascism (Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania), strongly connected to the ideas of Christian nationalism, national independence and historical injustice (Mihaylova 2015; Nedelsky 200; Pastor 2012, 5; Mihálik and Jankoľa (2016).

The official policy of all post-independence governments in Slovakia has been to distance today’s Slovakia from its first independent state with its grim history of Jewish deportations5 and discrimination of all non-Catholics and the Romany. Nevertheless, there have been attempts to rehabilitate the first Slovak State. Its president Dr. Jozef Tiso was a Roman Catholic priest who was executed for crimes against humanity. Some revisionist historians6 during the early years of post-communist state-building argued that the Catholic Church tried to save many Jews and blamed his execution on a post-1945 communist propaganda (Kocúr 2016; Harris 2002, 81-82).

Mr. Kotleba, in his pre-ĽSNS days spoke about the Jewish question and its handling by the Slovak State. In his speech which is available on You Tube he said that “we are of Slovak nationality, not Jewish nationality and therefore the Jewish question as such is of no interest to us” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02dAWAfuDww> ). The clothes may have changed, but the party’s ideological link to the wartime Slovak State remains. In 2017, it celebrated 14 March 1939 when the Slovak State was declared as the “day of Slovak stateness” with a sermon for Jozef Tiso, referred to as “so far the only real president of Slovakia” and the gala dinner for 400 invited guests, as was reported on the blog of *DennikN* newspaper March 20, 2017 <https://dennikn.sk/blog/709155/kotleba-ludova-strana-nase-slovensko-1488/>.

Despite different levels of intensity, all far right parties share the same characteristics: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Pirro 2014, 601; Pirro2015, 2; Mudde 2007, 26). Nativism is a particularly virulent form of ethnic nationalism which holds that the state belongs to or should be inhabited exclusively by a native group, a particular and exclusive nation expressed in ethnic terms (Harris 2012, 339; Androvičová 2016, 339; Kazahrski 2017, 15). It does not only divide the people into “in” and “out” group, but it present the “out” group as dangerous or harmful to the values, safety and identity of the native people (Mudde, 2007, 19).

Authoritarianism stands for a strictly ordered society in which the individual freedoms and democratic principles are subordinate to the state. Radical right populism is related to both nativism and authoritarianism with the core element of its rhetoric being “the people” (Brubaker 2017, 362). The widely used definition of populism is a vision of society as divided between the good “pure” people and the “corrupt” elites (Pirro 2014, 601; Brubaker 2017). The “pure” stands for hard-working, ordinary and decent people who are struggling against “the elite,” inhabiting a different world of privilege with little regard for ordinary people and their values. But, the “populist anger” (Brubaker 2017, 363) is not directed only at elites. It is also directed toward those labelled as parasites and scroungers– people who don’t deserve state benefits or respect of good people – and also at outsiders who do not belong to the culturally and ethnically bound nation.

For example, the *ĽSNS* which combines all above mentioned components of far right extremism calls on its official website for: “bravery against the system” and claims that it is

“the only alternative and opposition to the corrupted and criminal “democratic” system and the current parliamentary parties, which all have been more or less participating in stealing the treasures of our country and in betraying and selling

out our nation” (<http://www.naseslovensko.net/en/about-us/> ).

In its “10 Commandments” programme it claims to “prevent foreigners from buying land in Slovakia” and “strengthen the control of illegal employment of foreigners, immigration and visa policy”. Moreover, to “put a stop to the preferential treatment of all social parasites, including gypsy parasites” (<http://www.naseslovensko.net/en/our-program/>).

I am suggesting that the migration crisis provided nativists with the ideal “out” group. This could explains the anti-immigrant rhetoric, except that there are no large numbers of immigrants in Slovakia, even if there is a (manufactured) fear of them. Slovakia was the last EU member state to adopt migration policy in 2014 and its integration policies “raise major doubt about their effectiveness” (<http://visegradrevue.eu/slovak-migration-policy-poisoned-by-hypocrisy/>). Slovakia’s mainstream and extreme political parties exploited anxiety about immigrants with some 70% of the population believing that it leads to the rise of criminality and terrorism (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová 2016: 40-41).

Pirro (2014) noted the different context of the far right in Central and Eastern Europe when compared to Western Europe. He argues that while the most prominent hypothesis about the emergence of the populist radical right in the West rests on unemployment and xenophobia, this is an inadequate lens through which to analyse the far right in Eastern Europe and that the more appropriate is the lens of historical legacies and idiosyncrasies of post-communism. The remainder of this article explores these, specifically post-communist issues, in more detail.

**Slovakia in the context of Central Europe**

Today’s Slovakia was established 1 January 1993, after the break-up of post-communist Czechoslovakia. The first independent Slovakia was a short-lived wartime Slovak state which emerged after the Munich Agreement (1938) and Hitler’s subsequent declaration of the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia,” (1939), thus breaking up the first Czechoslovakia (1918- 1938). Though it owed its existence to Hitler’s favour, the Slovak state is the only experience of Slovak people with political independence, prior to 1993 (Nedelsky 2001, 215). Perhaps inevitably, its existence and its legacy influenced the early years of post-1993 independence with some political parties, mainly the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská Národná Strana,* SNS) and Christian Democratic Movement (*Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie*, KDH), showing a degree of ambivalence toward the first Slovak state. However, it is important to emphasise once more that while many Slovak politicians, past and present, employ nationalist rhetoric as a matter of political discourse (Walter 2017, 175), it can’t be argued that contemporary Slovakia has ever viewed itself as a successor state of its wartime predecessor.

With its party politics being shaped by national identity, post-communist legacies, Europeanisation and corruption, Slovakia resembles “postcommunist Europe in miniature” (Haughton 2014, 211) and it is therefore a constructive case for the exploration of Central European political space, also known as the Visegrád group (V4). This regional arrangement between Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland was formed in 1991, originally for the purpose of the preservation of a distinct Central European regional identity and gaining EU membership which was successfully accomplished in 2004. But, Slovakia, differs from Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, on a number of levels.

First, Slovakia is a newly independent state; its history is less well-known than that of its V4 neighbours. As elaborated elsewhere (Harris 2002, chapter 4; Henderson 2002), its political legitimacy is tightly connected to nationalism and its past which is still being constructed and formalised within an ongoing nation-and state-building process. Second, democracy was slower in coming to Slovakia than to its neighbours. In 1997, Slovakia was initially excluded from the leading group of post-communist countries to negotiate EU membership, because it did not “fulfil in a satisfying manner the political conditions set out by the European Council” (EU Commission report, cited in Harris 2002, 197). After the 1998 elections, dynamics in the country changed from the ambivalent attitude to liberal democracy, combined with strong nationalist leanings and hostility to minorities (Henderson 2002, 72) to the restoration of democratic transition which was synchronised with the ‘Europeanisation’ (Harris and Henderson forthcoming). Slovakia did join the EU in 2004 together with the rest of the V4 and these days, it appears to be the least problematic among them (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, 78;).

As of January 7, 2019, the *Nations in Transit 2018* gives Slovakia the unchanged score of 2,61/7 (whereby 1 is the most democratic and 7 is the least democratic) for the third year running (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2018> ). While Poland with considerable decline in the category of democratic governance remains within the cluster of consolidated democracies at 2,89, the highest cumulative decline at 3,71 shifts Hungary to a semi-consolidated democracy. In both Hungary and Poland their leading parties (*Fidesz* and *PiS* [*Prawo i* *Sprawiedlivość*] respectively) frame their “nationalistic, socially conservative appeals in populist terms” (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley, 2018, 245). From one-time democratic frontrunners, both Hungary and Poland are now largely viewed as paradigmatic cases of “democratic backsliding” (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley 2018). The Czech Republic’s score has been dropping year on year and stands at 2, 29.

The Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who is facing unresolved criminal charges for EU subsidy fraud is, ironically, using anti-corruption platform to win and maintain power (Hanley and Vachudová 2018, 277). The notable distinction between the Czech Republic and the rest of the V4 is that Babiš appeals to voters with a more technocratic than nationalist agenda, but Hanley and Vachudová ( 2018) argue that his partnership with the notoriously xenophobic and Eurosceptic President Miloš Zeman is nevertheless taking the Czech Republic down a new and less democratic path.

Economically, Slovakia is said to be one of the fastest growing economies in Europe (<https://tradingeconomics.com/slovakia/gdp-growth>) and achieved a higher standard of living than Hungary and even Poland which with a higher GDP growth rate (1.02) has lower GDP per capita. According to the *Trading Economics* website (https://tradingeconomics.com/), the GDP growth rate in Slovakia averaged 0.98 percent from 1995 until 2019; in the same period the Czech Republic averaged 0.59 percent and Hungary 0.62 percent.

Notwithstanding its democratic credentials and robust economy, a hugely polarising issue in Slovak politics remains corruption which enrages civil society (Kazharski 2017, 23; Harris and Henderson forthcoming 2019). Corruption is the lowest category (3,75 unchanged since 2013 and never below 3, 25 since 2009) of all democratic criteria by which Slovakia’s democracy is being assessed ( <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2018/slovakia>). The low score for corruption is comparable to the Czech Republic (3.5) and Poland (3.5), but not to Hungary which has dropped to 4.75. Nevertheless, it is Slovakia that in February 2018 experienced the murder of a journalist Ján Kuciak (and his fiancée). Kuciak was investigating links between organised crime, business groups and the state bureaucracy. His murder triggered massive demonstrations, under the banner “Movement for decent Slovakia,” demanding resignations of the then prime minister Robert Fico and Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák who if not directly implicated in corruption, were blamed for their inability to prevent it. Both eventually resigned under the pressure of protesters and the new prime minister became Fico’s deputy Peter Pellegrini.

In connection to many corruption scandals in Slovakia which public perceives to affect all mainstream parties – left and right – noteworthy are two issues. First, Kotleba’s extreme right ĽSNS which claims to be an alternative to all mainstream parties “combines its anti-EU and anti-migration narratives with anti-corruption” ( Kazahrski 2017, 23) in what turned out to be a successful strategy to make a political breakthrough. Second, the victory of a liberal lawyer Zuzana Čaputová as the first female President of Slovakia against the leading *Smer* party candidate Maroš Šefčovič ought to be seen within the context of public discontent with corruption. Given the steady rise of illiberal politics across Central Europe, her victory was celebrated in western press as “ray of hope,” a victory of “liberalism in a populist age” (<https://www.ft.com/content/f0902de6-5255-11e9-9c76-bf4a0ce37d49>) and a “rebuke to nationalism” ([https://www.bloomberg.com/nNot ews/articles/2019-03-30/anti-graft-activist-set-to-be-slovakia-s-first-woman-president](https://www.bloomberg.com/nNot%20ews/articles/2019-03-30/anti-graft-activist-set-to-be-slovakia-s-first-woman-president)). Not wishing to diminish the significance of liberal forces in Slovakia it is too premature and oversimplifies the issue of post-communist politics as the rest of this article will show and as has been argued by Michael Rossi in LSE blog (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/06/14/slovakias-progressive-turn-is-a-rejection-of-corruption-not-a-stand-against-populism/> ).

This regional assessment in levels of democracy has its drawbacks, particularly if democratic regression in Slovakia is viewed through the prism of Hungary and Poland. Slovakia is not seeking to build an “illiberal state” as Orbán claims to do (*Financial Times*, August 29, 2016). Nor has the EU launched proceedings against Slovakia as it has against Poland for its attempts to impose controls over the media, the election of civil servants and judiciary, as reported by the *European press roundup* December 21, 2018 (<https://www.eurotopics.net/en/191524/eu-commission-launches-proceedings-against-poland>). At this stage, it is unlikely that the ĽSNS would win a parliamentary majority. On the other hand, there is value in probing issues of regional convergence and divergence in order to interpret political dynamics in Slovakia.

Slovakia’s accession to the European Union has been a political and economic success. The opinion survey commissioned by the Globsec Policy Institute (November 2017) shows 69 % support for the membership of the EU ( <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Analyza-prieskumu-verejnej-mienky.pdf> ) with some 85 % of the population rejecting Brexit.7 As the only Eurozone state within the V4, Slovakia is economically more (inter)dependent on the EU than its neighbours, but its relationship with Brussels remains complex. Its desire to belong to the core of the EU is based on fear of exclusion and economic interests rather than a desire for greater integration which is then at odds with the hostility towards the immigrants, but in tune with the rest of the V4. Robert Fico has filed a breach of EU rules case against migrant quotas at the European Court of Justice, but then accepted 16 refugees as a part of the quota system. The promise to take more was enough to avoid the infringement procedures that the ECJ began against the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in December 2017 ([www.netky.sk/clanok/komisia-spustila-pravne-konanie-voci-cesku-madarsku-a-polsku-kvoli-odmietaniu-utecencov](http://www.netky.sk/clanok/komisia-spustila-pravne-konanie-voci-cesku-madarsku-a-polsku-kvoli-odmietaniu-utecencov)).

While some political analysts claim that Hungary (and Poland ) “with their aggressive anti-EU rhetoric have ceased to be partners to Slovakia’s future within the EU,” 8 Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s aggressive anti-Muslim, anti- immigrant rhetoric resonates well with a strong anti-Islam rhetoric by the now departed Prime Minister Fico. Ahead of his third time election victory in 2016, he vowed that he would not accept “a single Muslim,” and that “Islam has no place” in Slovakia (*Independent* May 27, 2016; Haughton, Malova and Deegan-Krause 2016).

The governing *Smer* partystatement (which I received during my visit to party’s headquarters in April 2016 from the then party’s spokeswoman Katarína Vidovičová) explains that the resistance to migration quota reflects the concern about the integration of people “from very different cultures, with different values and traditions”, into historically a relatively culturally homogeneous Slovakia. It argues that in the context of the migration crisis, the Christian refugees from the Middle East appear to represent a group with “the greatest integration potential” because they have at least something in common with “our environment.” On my second visit in the spring of 2017, Syrian Christian refugees were not accepted either. No amount of inducements would convince local communities to accept refugees; they “expressed deep sorrow about their situation, wished them well, but they did not want them in their midst.” 9 We can only infer that a common faith does not constitute enough integration potential and that the resistance to refugees lies in a fact that they are foreign.

Are the observers who claim “the unravelling of the post-1989 order” (Krastev 2016, 69) and the “normative rupture between the East and the West” (Kazharski 2017, 2) overly alarmist? The “compassion deficit” (Krastev 2015) in handling the migration crisis was disturbing and the success of illiberal political parties is concerning. On the other hand, illiberalism nourished by xenophobia is “surging everywhere”, not just “in the East” (Kazharski 2017, 2; Brubaker 2017).

The point I am making is that the situation in Slovakia, despite a relative health of its democracy, is not different to that of their neighbours. The threat to democracy does not come from extremists only, but from the accumulation of factors that undermine its embeddedness in society. As I have already shown, since 1989 to this day Slovakia’s political scene has been marked by an ongoing confrontation between liberal-democratic and national-populist forces which have a tendency toward more authoritarianism. The latter includes the two most powerful forces in Slovak politics: the HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia- *Hnutie* *za Demokratické Slovensko*/) and *Smer* – SD (*Direction-* Social Democracy). The HZDS under the leadership of Vladimír Mečiar and three-time prime minister dominated post-1989 Slovakia. He presided over Slovakia’s split from Czechoslovakia and came to symbolise the difficult transition of Slovakia.

Robert Fico formed *Smer* –*SD* while in opposition (1999). Benefitting from both a vacuum on the left and his ability to win nationalist voters from Mečiar’s HZDS, he became the longest serving prime minister in independent Slovakia to date (2006, 2010, 2012 and 2016). These two parties created coalition governments in 1992, 1994, 2006, 2010, 2012 and 2016 (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, 81; Haughton 2014; Harris and Henderson forthcoming). Noteworthy is the presence of the previously mentioned (radical) nationalist SNS in both Mečiar governments (1992 and 1994) and in *Smer*-led governments since 2006, with the exception of 2012-2016 when *Smer* formed a single-party government.

While neither party managed to significantly subvert the liberal-democratic system as is currently happening in Hungary and Poland, their confrontational style of politics, inclination toward cronyism and nationalism have created an environment in which liberal-democratic values appear to be negotiable and relative to the political aims of the moment.

Mihálik and Jankoľa (2016) demonstrate that at the peak of migration crisis (May – October 2015) the most negative response to migrants in the Media came from the governing party *Smer,* followed by the parliamentary SNS and the at that time still non-parliamentary ĽSNS (p. 13-17). Slovakia is in tune with its neighbours in ethnic interpretation of the nation and increased preference for national sovereignty, despite the fact that there was no direct threat to its sovereignty, negligible number of immigrants and a very low risk of terrorism.

The breakthrough of the ĽSNS into a legitimate parliamentary party ought to be seen within this political environment – the persistence of ethno-nationalist interpretation of national identity by nearly all parties since 1990 and the radicalisation of this rhetoric by the mainstream in recent years (Kazharski 2017, 21; Mihálik and Jankoľa 2016; Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, 84; Walter 2017). There are deep-rooted underlying factors why that is the case and why riding that particular wave is electorally advantageous.

**“The people” in Eastern and Central Europe**

One way or another, right wing radicalism is connected to nationalist politics. In an effort to explain the persistence of nationalism in post-communism, Harris (2012) defended the notion of “eastern nationalism”, on the basis of a different historical sequence between the emergence of Eastern and Western European nations. Almost all of Eastern Europe was subsumed within the Habsburg, Romanov and Ottoman empires where the only possible political mobilisation of nationalities against the existing order was an ethnic principle (Harris 2012, 341; Minkenberg 2015, 38).

This is contrary to the majority of Western European nations which developed within or alongside states. Hence, the dichotomy between eastern ethnic conception of nationhood and western civic conception of nationhood (the former tending toward illiberalism, the latter toward democracy). Notwithstanding the well-justified criticism of this geographically inspired dichotomy (Harris 2012; Jutilla 2009; Kuzio 2002), it bears relevance to the present discussion. My point is that not geography, but historical contingency and socio-political conditions are responsible for nationalism and its character. Therefore, there are a number of region’s specific factors which explain the prevalence of, if not “predisposition to ethnic nationalism” in post-communist Europe (Harris 2002 and 2012; Brubaker 1996; Kazharski 2017, 14).

The national question in Eastern and Central Europe goes back to the collapse of empires and the imposition of nation-states in regions where people’s national aspirations were time after time suppressed by the hostile empires or deprived of territories they considered their homelands. This fed the interwar nationalism which in some cases led to the wartime disintegration of post-1918 multinational states, such as Czechoslovakia (and Yugoslavia), the annexation of territories and the establishment of authoritarian regimes across the whole region.

The post-1945 communist regimes manipulated historical memory and people’s political allegiances and made the national question an enemy of the prevailing communist ideology. But, the story of the ethnic nation did not disappear during the communist period. On the contrary, it was institutionalised through nationality policies which distinguished between state citizenship and ethnonational groups, either as federal units within multinational communist federations or as minorities (Brubaker 1996, 26-29; Harris 2012, 342). While communist centralised authoritarian states sought to remove any social and political differentiation, they maintained folk festivals, ethnic cultural organisations and generally exploited, exalted and victimised ethnicity at the same time (Harris 2012, 343; Verdery 1996, 86).

The understanding of the eastern nation has thus been formed through all too frequent changes of regimes and borders during the pre-communist and communist era, each time adding another layer of ethnic nationalism to the existing one. This was the nationalism that overwhelmed post-communist transitions and became an answer to democratisation when the “national” question would be answered once and for all.

The post-1989 disintegration of communist multinational states was typically, once more, accompanied by the rise of the nation-state whose national elites promote the core (ethnic) self-determining national group in whose name and on behalf of which the state came into existence. This is not because people in the eastern part of the European continent are anachronistic, but because democracy requires a legitimate political unit for “the people” to exercise it. Historically, in Eastern and Central Europe, the answer to “which people” and “whose state” is answered by ethnicity (Harris 2016, 244) which to this day holds political significance.

The establishment of the new states changes regional interethnic dynamics and ads even more significance to ethnicity. The promotion of language, culture, demographic position and political hegemony of the state-forming ethno-cultural group tends to alienate minorities. Their resistance galvanises their kin-state across the border into protecting their co-ethnics in the newly nationalising state, so that there are three different mutually interacting nationalisms around the border of nearly all new states (such as Slovakia). This “triadic” condition maintains ethnicity (Brubaker 1996; Minkenberg 2013, 16) at the centre of political life due to historically motivated mistrust between neighbouring states and ethnic groups. Where the nation-building elites perceive “the nation” to have been divided by state boundaries, as for example in Hungary, it exacerbates attempts at irredentism or the other side of the same coin – the fear thereof as in Slovakia. While in western countries, minorities are rarely viewed in terms of territorial integrity of the state, in post-communist Europe, they are often understood in terms of loyalty to their kin-state that in the past was historically and politically more powerful if not hostile to the current majority nation (Androvičová 2016, 341; Henderson 2002).

The Slovak-Hungarian relationship in the early 1990s was an example of such mistrust between Slovakia, its Hungarian minority and Hungary. It impacted on the post-independence Slovak political party system, it fed the rhetoric of the SNS and the HZDS and slowed down its democratic consolidation. Any political demand by the Hungarian minority was seen as a threat to the Slovak nation and its new state. While this is no longer the case and the Hungarian minority parties have been and currently are in the governing coalition, Hungary’s own role as a kin-state bearing “responsibility for the fate of Hungarians living beyond its borders” is constitutionally endorsed in the Article D of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (Harris 2012, 348).

The sensitivity of this issue can be seen in the “Amendment to the Act on Slovak state citizenship” (§9.16). In response to the new post-2010 Hungarian dual citizenship applicable since 2011 for all ethnic Hungarians living in the “lost” territories, the Slovak government presented it as a threat to Slovak territorial integrity and passed a law by which “a citizen of the Slovak Republic will lose Slovak citizenship on the day he/she voluntarily obtains citizenship of a foreign country” as is explained by the Legal Monitoring & Partners [www.futej.sk/data/enu/Legal%20Information%20and%20Analysis/Memorandum-Extensive-amendment-to-the-act-on-Slovak-state-citizenship.pdf](http://www.futej.sk/data/enu/Legal%20Information%20and%20Analysis/Memorandum-Extensive-amendment-to-the-act-on-Slovak-state-citizenship.pdf). Thus, ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia can obtain Hungarian citizenship only if they are willing to be stripped of their Slovak citizenship which given that the majority of them have lived in Czechoslovakia at least since 1918 did not attract many takers.

This historically conditioned ethnic interpretation of national identity impacts on political rhetoric in a number of interrelated ways. In post-communist Europe “the socio-cultural division remains central to political party competition, and not socio-economic division as is the tendency in Western Europe” (Kazharski 2017, 14-15) which accounts for the continuing politicisation of ethnicity. Nationalism is not confined to the far right, but constitutes the mainstream itself (Minkenberg 2015, 39; Kazharski 2017) which explains why in Slovakia, a socio-economically left-leaning leading governing party *Smer* engages in the right-wing nationalist rhetoric (Mihálik and Jankuľa 2016, 10).

Relatedly, due to “a relatively short period of political plurality” (Gyárfášová, Bahna and Slosiarik 2017, 4), post-communist political parties did not develop along established societal cleavages, but were formed mostly by political elites for the purpose of their own electoral advantage. In the absence of long-term loyalty of their voters, they tend to fill the loyalty gap and supplement ideologically shallow roots by pervasive narratives about “the nation”, its identity and national survival. The result is that in post-communist countries, unlike in Western Europe, radical and extreme right are not operating within a system where there is a clear *cordon sanitaire* between the mainstream and the far right (Minkenberg, 2015, 50). I am arguing that in order to appeal to voters disillusioned with the mainstream, parties such as ĽSNS employ more extreme rhetoric which has been thus legitimised by the mainstream.

**Nation before democracy? Nationalist persistence in Slovak politics**

So far, I have argued that ethno-nationalism and identity politics are a part of political competition in post-communist countries generally, but even more so in a newly independent state such as Slovakia. The frequency of the rise and fall of states, regimes and borders, loss of territories, real or perceived threats and compromised sovereignty impact hugely on the understanding of “the nation” and its relationship to the state. My argument is in line with Hiers, Soehl and Wimmer (2017) who question the mainstream literature on immigration with its focus on competition for jobs. Instead they place “long-accumulated threats to the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of the nation” (Hiers, Soehl and Wimmer 2017, 383) at the centre of their analysis. While migration is behind the rise of the radical and extreme right and populism everywhere, the alarming rhetoric from Central European political leadership, including Slovakia, relied on certain pre-conditions which made this discourse familiar and therefore acceptable to public.

First, is the direct link between migrants and the security of the country which relied on a long-standing experience of electoral success in the securitisation of minorities as was discussed earlier. Second, is the absence of any previous experience with discussions around migration (Androvičová 2016, 359), the claims by politicians were not refuted because the public had no experience of migration and there were no norms or parameters for this discussion established before. Third, a little regard for international obligation to accept migrants. Slovakia’s Interior Ministry’s statistics on asylum and migration show that in 2017 out of 166 applications for asylum, only 29 were awarded and 16 refugees were given protection; in 2018 only 3 out of 168 applications for asylum were awarded and 22 refugees accepted (<http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20> ).

*Novỳ Čas*,January 20, 2018 reported Fico at a meeting of V4 leaders saying that:

“I reject the formation of Muslim communities in Slovakia. Slovakia is a safe country, I want a safe country and I don’t see any reason for bringing in thousands of Muslims from around the world, as Brussel or perhaps other states are asking us to do. This is my politics, the politics of safe Slovakia”

 (<https://www.cas.sk/clanok/649151/najdrsnejsie-vyjadrenie-fica-o-moslimoch-na-slovensku-kym-bude-robo-premierom-toto-sa-nikdy-nestane/> ). By emphasizing the safety of the country, is he really expressing a fear of a small nation (Henderson 2002) whose entrance into history is too short as not to be threatened by the influx of foreigners, however small their numbers may be? What are the reasons for a “deeply rooted mistrust of the cosmopolitan mindset” (Krastev 2016, 93) in post-communist Europe?

The first reason may be the lack of trust in internationalism which after all was a catchphrase of communism from which they have liberated themselves only recently. The second reason could be that having achieved the possession of the state by the majority and having secured economic survival of it through European integration when liberal democracy was the only option, the continuing ownership of the state by its “rightful” owners is considered a legitimate political strategy. In Hungary and Poland, nationalist populism is a strategy to curb media independence and ignore the fundamental democratic principle of separation of powers. Yet, their populations, having shaken off political authoritarianism seem less concerned by new illiberalism when it is presented as the “restoration of popular sovereignty” (Rupnik 2016, 79).

The same must be said about Slovakia. The persistence of ethnic understanding of the nation as the rightful people in charge of their political destiny is blurring the boundary between democracy and nationalism. For example, opinion polls show that 40% of the population prefers social order and social “justice” at the cost of curbing other democratic freedoms (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová 2016,41).

The long existing polarisation between the proponents of liberal democratic values and pro-Western foreign policy orientation and those more indifferent to democratic values and sceptical about the results of transition and European integration is now as intense as it was in the early 1990s. The mainstream politicians who were well versed in nationalist and anti-minority rhetoric with its emphasis on the state-forming nation have taken advantage of the migration crisis. They remobilised the slowly subsiding ethno-centricism that animated the post-independence state-building era of Slovak politics (Haughton 2014,219), Whether as a result of their efforts, or the increasingly more racist online media and propaganda of far right parties, the recent polls show that only 18 percent of the Slovak public accepts the idea of refugees settling in their country (Mesežnikkov and Gyárfašová 2018, 86).

Exclusionary ethno-centricism is a competitive rhetorical field though. Fico’s vehemently anti-immigrant election campaign in 2016 contributed to his third election victory (Haughton, Malova and Deegan-Krause 2016; Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018, 86). His socio-economic left-populist variant was competing with the right-wing conservative version of his coalition partner, the Slovak National Party. But, both were rhetorically outdone by the ĽSNS to which I am now returning in order to convey the specific conditions which made its extremism attractive to Slovak voters.

The ĽSNS which in Slovakia (and in this article) is referred to as the extreme right, as opposed to other ‘ultra nationalist’ parties with certain similarities has participated in 3 general elections since its formation in 2010. As Table 1. shows, “ultra nationalist” parties were negligible in terms of electoral results and eventually disappeared from the political scene altogether. This concurs with Mareš and Havlík (2016, 323) who argue that the surprising success of the Hungarian *Jobbik* in 2014 20.2 % owes much to the fact that “in Hungary the extreme right draws on a long tradition” and that “only Slovakia has a similar situation” (332).

*TABLE 1 PLEASE INSERT SOMEWHERE HERE*

Haughton, Malová and Deegan-Krause argued in the *Washington Post* article ‘Slovakia’s newly elected parliament is dramatically different and pretty much the same’ on March 9, 2016, that the election results “show that Slovakia is everywhere.” They point to the frustration and disillusion of voters with politicians, corruption and poor governance and stress that these challenges are faced by all modern democracies. In that sense the ĽSNS, offered extreme solutions – rejection not just of foreigners, but the rejection of the whole system in which “the nation” is no longer in charge. In other words: the nation comes before democracy.

Besides historical and political environment which I have been exploring, ***other factors******contributed*** ***to*** ***the success of the ĽSNS****.* First of all, Mr. Kotleba’s political role of a regional governor (2013) gained him personal legitimacy. This despite his past involvement in violence against police and participation in anti-Roma violence which however in his case were not followed by a criminal record, unlike with other members of his party. Second, not ever having governmental responsibility, the vote for him was not necessarily for this party, but the rejection of other parties and politicians frequently embroiled in corruption scandals. The 2016 election results show rising radicalisation of society and a significantly increased public dissatisfaction with established political parties, including Fico’s *Smer* (Gyárfášová, Bahna and Slosiarik 2017,19; Haughton, Malova and Deegan-Krause 2016). Thirdly, as already suggested, radical rhetoric has been legitimised by the mainstream parties. Besides *Smer’s* anti-immigration rhetoric and anti-Hungarian and anti-Roma rhetoric by the *SNS* inthe past, there was also a ferocious anti-EU rhetoric by Richard Sulík, the leader of the parliamentary party *SaS* (Freedom and Solidarity[*Sloboda and Solidarity*]) who were a part of the government 2010-2012*.* Kotleba, more than any other party contesting the 2016 elections, stole nationalist thunder from the SNS (Pirro 2019, 788) and the mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric made his ferocity at all things foreign appear less extreme.

Fourthly, returning to this party’s ideological links to wartime authoritarianism, its current legitimacy is impacted by education, if indirectly. The school curricula do not deal with the history of the Second World War in Slovakia which means that young people are not aware of crimes committed by the Slovak State during its reign 1939-45. This history was not a part of the communist education either, because the regime underplayed the Holocaust and subsumed it under crimes of the German Nazism against communists and others. This official political stance had for many years not only inhibited debates about the Holocaust at both official and personal levels (Salner 2017, 87), but conspired in nearly removing the collaboration of Slovak citizens in the deportation of their Jewish co-citizens to concentration camps from Slovakia’s history. While Slovak politicians have recently been attending and financing Holocaust memorials (<http://newsnow.tasr.sk/featured/president-and-premier-open-holocaust-museum-in-sered/>) they have not curbed hostile rhetoric against the Roma, Muslims and other minorities which allows for anti-Semitism to continue within radical circles.

Finally, there appears to be a little if any teaching about the character of totalitarian regimes and ideologies, liberal-democratic values or human rights. Equally, there is little said about the danger of ethno-nationalism and racism or religious intolerance. All leads to the relativisation of certain historical events and to numbing of critical understanding of themes propagated by the ĽSNS.10

The most alarming aspect of the 2016 success of ĽSNS is that 22% of its vote were young people or people who have never voted before (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2016, 37-38). It is clear that this party has an appeal among voters which previously remained untapped by other parties. After the 2016 elections, the ĽSNS was politically isolated and until recently it was assumed that it has no coalition potential. Fico claimed that his party will be a “barrier against extremism.” However, recent developments suggest that the barrier is slowly crumbling.

*Smer* (together with the populist *Sme Rodina* party and the Slovak National Party) has recently sought the support of the ĽSNS to halt the ratification of a European Treaty designed to combat violence against women (<https://www.socialeurope.eu/zuzana-caputovas-victory-slovakia> ). The ĽSNS voted with *Smer* (the SNS and *Sme Rodina*) in passing the age pension ceiling bill and Fico thanked them for their support ([https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22086018/ poslanci-schvalili-zastropovanie-dochodkoveho-veku.html](https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22086018/%20poslanci-schvalili-zastropovanie-dochodkoveho-veku.html)). With the campaign for 2020 general elections having kicked off, it should not be assumed that its coalition potential will remain weak and therefore the parliamentary breakthrough of the ĽSNS poses a considerable challenge to Slovakia’s democratic future.

**Conclusion**

My aim here was to explore the recent political dynamics in Slovakia in order to make sense of the electoral breakthrough of the extreme right People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) to a parliamentary party. I pursued this aim not through the analysis of party politics, but by exploring the socio-political context within which public became receptive to extremist appeals of the ĽSNS. I demonstrated its ideological links to the wartime fascist Slovak State (including vigilantism), the rejection of liberal democratic values and all things non-Slovak, immigrants and the Roma. Its xenophobic exaltation of the Slovak nation is then augmented by the populist condemnation of the political system and its elites. This is consistent with the academic literature on the extreme right in Eastern and Central Europe which I analysed in some detail.

Situating Slovakia within its Central European context, we can’t get away from the fact that the region is in democratic difficulties. Slovakia, while currently achieving higher democratic credentials than its neighbours has failed to deflect the rise of the far right extremism. I argue that this failure is connected to deeply rooted ethno-nationalism which runs throughout Slovakia’s historical, political and national development, from pre-communist times to the present. Post-communist transition to democracy and European integration also failed to diminish the very narrow ethnic conception of the Slovak nation among many people. This condition was then exacerbated by the radical rhetoric of the mainstream political parties which was emboldened by the migration crisis, as well as compounded by the specificities of Slovakia’s educational system which has consistently ignored the darker side of Slovakia’s past during the interwar period.

I have also argued that the current tide of illiberalism in Central Europe and its expression in the radicalisation of the mainstream parties, as well as the presence of the extremist ĽSNS in the Slovak parliament rises within societies where socio-cultural divisions eclipse socio-economic divisions. It is not necessarily the competition for jobs and resources that drove the hostile response of Central European political establishment to the migration crisis of 2015-16. It is the accumulation of threats connected to their dramatic and insecure national histories which have shaped their perceptions about sovereignty, democracy and European integration. In times of a heightened sense of threat – real or manufactured - democratic norms and principles come secondary to the nation, its identity and its sovereignty.

The relativisation of liberal-democratic values and xenophobia are contributing to the overall rise of populism across the EU. From that perspective there may not be a normative rupture between the East and the West as has been claimed in the view of ever declining democracy in Poland and Hungary. There is however a gap between historical, political, cultural and economic developments in the East and the West. This gap was obscured or perhaps willingly ignored by elites during post-communist transitions which were happening too fast to significantly change perceptions and alleviate national insecurities; certainly too shallow to withstand the current “populist moment” ( Brubaker 2017, 357) and illiberal trend facing both Eastern and Western democracies. The case of Slovakia shows that the concern should be with historical legacies and the political context within which extremism rises – anywhere.

**Notes**

Special issue. 2018. “Rethinking 'democratic backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe” *East European Politics*  34 (3); *Journal of Democracy* 29(3), 2018, particularly articles by Jacques Rupnik, Péter Krekó, Wojciech Przybylski, Jiri Pehe and Grigorij Mesežnikov and Oľga Gyárfášová.

The run-off presidential election on March 30th was won by Zuzana Čaputová, a female liberal lawyer. Her victory, according to an article by Erika Harris in *Social Europe* should be seen within the continued battle for Slovakia’s political future—moving towards more autocratic populist governments, or sustaining the premise of liberal-democratic institutions and values <https://www.socialeurope.eu/zuzana-caputovas-victory-slovakia>

Interview with Tomas Nagy, Senior Researcher at Globsec, Bratislava 31 March 2017.

In Slovakia, the radical right usually refers to the parliamentary Slovak National Party (SNS) known for its explicitly nationalist agenda. The ĽSNS is referred to as extreme in the press and by political analysts.

The majority of 130 000 Slovak Jews (90 000) remained in the Slovak State and 40 000 were living in the territory which was annexed by Hungary and came under its jurisdiction. Approximately 12 000 returned from the concentration camps (Jurová and Šalamon 1994).

For example, the book *Zamlčaná Pravda o Slovensku* (Partizánske: Garmond 1996), consists of contributions of a number of revisionist historians, under the collective name “Friends of President Tiso in Slovakia and abroad,” defending the Church and its role in deportations of Jews.

Interview with Vladimír Bilčík, senior researcher at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) 31 March 2017 in Bratislava.

Interview with Tomáš Stražay, senior researcher at the SFPA, 6 April 2017.

Interview with Tomas Nagy, senior researcher at the think-tank Globsec, 31 march 2017.

Interview with Oľga Gyárfášová, analyst at IVO (*Inštitút pre verejné otázky*) 7 April 2017.

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**Table 1: Results of ultranationalist and extreme right parties in parliamentary elections 1992-2016 (in %).**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Parties  | 1992 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2006 | 2010 | 2012  | 2016 |
| ***Ultra nationalists*** |
| *Slovenská ľudová strana (SĽS,* Slovak people’s party) | 0.30 | - | 0.27 | - | 0,16 | - | - | - |
| *Slovenská národná jednota (SNJ, Slovak national unity)* | - | - | 0,13 | 0,15 | - | - | - | - |
| *Hnutie za oslobodenie Slovenska* (HzOS, Movement for the liberation of Slovakia) | 0.32 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| ***Extreme Right*** |
| *Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS)*  |  |  |  |  |  | 1,33 | 1,58 | 8.04 |

Source: Compiled using the information from the Slovakia’s Office of Statistics (*Štatistický úrad* SR, 1992–2016) <http://volby.statistics.sk/>