

Single-party Central Europe: Should the EU care?¹

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DISCUSSION PAPER

Abstract:

The recent parliamentary elections in Poland surprised many and resulted into a single party government, the third one in the Visegrad area, next to Slovakia and Hungary. Additionally, opinion polls in Slovakia suggest that Mr. Fico is going for another single-party office in March 2016. As these countries are multi-party parliamentary democracies, such results occurring in many countries signalise a considerable change in politics that is worth examining and that, as this paper argues, bears consequences for the EU governance as well. This paper attempts to identify main reasons why a single large party is capable of taking power. Based on Slovak case analysis I will argue that it's mainly due to the combination of change in the structure of political landscape, on the one hand, and extraordinary communication skills of selected politicians on the other hand. This complicates EU governance, as, firstly, „Brussels“ is blamed for most of the political bads, and, secondly, is rarely defended in the open political space. This paper concludes with some discussion points indicating possible ways out.

Keywords: Slovak parliamentary election, left-right divide, Visegrad politics

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Background

Founding fathers of modern European political science taught us that proportional electoral systems with relatively large district magnitudes should lead to multi-party systems and coalition governments (Duverger 1954). This knowledge has become part of the political science textbooks all over the world, despite being often discussed, tested and academically challenged (Taagepera and Grofman 1985, Riker 1976, and others). Although the electoral systems in all Visegrad countries are not pure examples of proportional representative systems with a large multimember districts, the electoral competition used to produce multi-party parliaments with a necessity to form a coalition government in Slovakia, The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland for a long time.

Apart from electoral system as a factor contributing to the fact that several political parties were needed to govern, there were other structural and value-based factors. Firstly, the descendants of former communist parties in the Visegrad countries used to traditionally stand against the parties promoting change, democracy and pro-western orientations (i.e. Communist party versus Civil democracy in the Czech Republic). Secondly, many countries have, or used to have, a large agrarian sector which consequently produces parties representing the specific group of voters (e.g. Polish People Party in Poland). On the other hand, in Slovakia there are ethnic issues, which results into a party representing Hungarian minority to be present in every single parliament since 1993. Briefly summing up, the structures of Central European societies is rather heterogeneous and therefore provide reasons for a system of several parties. Which, as a matter of fact, the Visegrad region indeed witnessed until recently.

In the remaining part of this discussion paper I will argue that the party competition came to a point where the safest way to win election is to appeal on identity issues based on negative campaign against Brussels. The first indication was already clear in the 1990s. The EU enlargement in the 2000s has shaped the party competition in another way, which suppressed ideological and policy-oriented political battles. Finally, the economic crisis provided another twist which puts Visegrad societies in a specific position with large amount of society having the feeling that the EU has not brought the promised prosperity, while it is endangering their identity simultaneously. This way of doing politics in Central Europe undermines proper European governance and widens the gap between the pro-EU and anti-EU parts of societies.

My argumentation is based on the case of Slovakia, although I refer to other countries' example when possible.

Party Competition I: Identity over Socio-Economics

Although there have been socio-economic elements in election campaigns in Slovakia since 1993, these have hardly dominated the electoral competition, and often were not among the top three issues. In the mid-1990s the Meciar government put Slovakia on a path away from liberal democracy and the Euro-Atlantic structures, as the combination of the EU and NATO membership used to be called. Meciar's electoral mobilisation was based on negative identity building. This often brought rhetoric that underlined the exceptionality and superiority of Slovakia. One of Meciar's famous and often quoted statement from the times was – if they don't want us in the West, we can turn to the East – underlining that Slovakia is proud enough not to submit to the EU's criticism (Trend 2015). This situation set the scene for the 1998 election with the most important issue of the state regime's character. The main divisions thus were not left versus right, but democracy versus autocracy, West or East, freedom versus shadows of the past (Deegan-Krause 2006; Haughton and Fisher 2008).

The coalition government formed after the 1998 election consisted of several parties, with the right wing SDK being the strongest one, and left-wing SDL the second. Two relatively large parties, a rightist one and a leftist one cooperated (although, admittedly, it had not been a smooth cooperation) because their shared goal was to bring the country back on its Western, pro-democratic track. This only underlines that the left-right socio-economic issues, as we know them from the Western polities, were not so important.

In 2002, the main question in the parliamentary elections was whether the Dzurinda government will be allowed to anchor Slovakia into the EU and NATO harbour, or whether Meciar's undemocratic practices would return. Already in 2002 the Smer party came out of election relatively strong. Fico's campaign was based on approving the Western orientation of country, however, not at the then rather low level of Slovakia's economic performance.

After all, Dzurinda managed to form another coalition government. Next to securing the EU membership for Slovakia, his government also pushed through several economic reforms based on neo-liberal paradigm with dominant ideas of liberalisation and privatisation. Between 2002 and 2006 socio-economic issues made its way to the public space and

gradually became also one of the top electoral issues in 2006. Gyarfasova (2011) considered it to be a novel element in Slovak party competition.

However, the economic topics did not dominate the political public space for long. Fico's party constructed a coalition government with two minor parties: Meciar's HZDS and nationalistic Slovak National Party (SNS). Haughton et al. noted that the two parties "had sullied the name of Slovakia in the 1990s" and the SNS being „openly anti-Hungarian and anti-Roma" (2011: 396). Fico's preference of new coalition partners was not taken well in the European Parliament. The Party of European Socialists put Fico's Smer in a so-called quarantine, which meant careful monitoring of his party at home, especially in relation to minority rights. No wonder that nationalistic issues became more dominant than the socio-economic issues before the 2010 elections. During the Fico's first government there were many corruption scandals revealed, both in the coalition and the opposition camps. Therefore corruption, or, to be more precise, anti-corruption fight became also a dominant issue in the party competition and has overshadowed the left-right socio-economic division.

Due to the crisis it was not possible to leave economy out of election campaign in 2010 as well as in 2012. However, the point is that it was not the decisive issue that would make the most important divide among political parties.

To sum this argument up, the core issue of the political competition in Slovakia since 1993 has been identity. On the one hand, there were political parties that appealed on Slovak national identity as something that is threatened by Czechs firstly (early 1990s), later Hungarians, a few times Roma minority, and lastly, Brussels. On the other hand, a few parties that claimed to be pro-European were not able to shape the political communication around values and European identity. Most often than not, the European Union has slowly become just an easy source of money, milking cow that will pay for roads, bridges and some social programs. Now this political landscape was not only hit by economic crisis, but it seemed the crisis was here to stay for a longer time.

Party Competition II: Role of the EU

The conditionality of the EU eastward enlargement has been studied extensively in the last decade or two. Most often this is linked to ability of the EU to make accessing countries behave in a certain way, accept its norms, adapt legislation. In addition to that, there are views

on how the EU enlargement changed the way political parties compete in the post-communist Europe.

First, becoming a member state required to adopt enormous amount of formal norms in many fields, mostly as part of the *acquis communautaire*. The fact that political parties attempting to access the EU were basically instructed what to do, as Grzymala-Busse argues, parties could only position themselves apart from each other in terms on how to do it. Consequently, as parties all had the same goals, Grzymala-Busse and Innes states that “elites have had little competitive leeway but to dispute each other’s *competence* in achieving the desired result. They compete on the parties’ *modus operandi* rather than over substantive programmatic alternatives or ideological commitments.” (2003: 66-67). However, not all the parties chose to compete only on the battlefield of technical competences, but decided to base their appeal on points that they knew had worked before. Grzymala-Busse and Innes say, that “successful competitive strategies have been those of technocracy, populism, and nationalism—the last two tending to be combined.” As experience proved not only in Slovak case, but also Hungarian (Mr. Orbán’s Fidesz) and Polish one (Mr. Kaczyński’s Law and Justice [PiS]), populism and nationalism have definitely produced a fruitful combination.

Second reason relates to the first one, to a considerable extent. As the European Union exerted its conditionality in order to ensure post-communist states adapt certain norms and legislation, politicians in Central Europe learned to blame the EU also for certain measures and policies not necessarily related to the EU. The reason is that if government wants to get certain policy reform through, it is easier to blame the EU and let it bear the social and political costs rather than defending it for the ideological reasons and thus take the responsibility on one’s own. This practice was quite often abused, for instance, in case of Slovak tax reform in 2003/4.

On the other hand, there was not only negative image of the EU. Many politicians and public actors were trying to paint a positive picture of the EU. However, values played role only in the beginning and the financial reasons of accepting the EU prevailed. Thus, it seemed, the politicians blamed Brussels for all the bad, and pretended that they were tolerating it only for the Union paying substantial amount of bills and bringing investors and jobs to Slovakia. In the next section I explain how this has changed after the crisis.

Party Competition III: After the Crisis or Never-ending Crisis?

Even before the financial crisis there were politicians that, mildly speaking, were not the biggest Euro-federalists on the old continent. For example, Mr. Fico had been rejecting the euro currency until he became the prime minister and was convinced by the epistemic community in Slovakia to agree on adopting euro. Blaming the EU for unpopular policies was easy because the local politicians could easily explain in Brussels that the local rhetoric has nothing to do with voting in the European Council. On the other hand, being in the Union had clear economic advantages. Either direct funds or reputation that allowed attracting foreign investors and thus contributes to economy growth.

This has changed after several years of what began as the financial crisis. Labour market in Slovakia started to contract, jobs were being lost week by week and many people could not sustain the life standard they used to have. One of the most known examples when this social conflict has materialised was a disagreement conflict over the European Financial Stability Fund in autumn 2011. One of the coalition party refused to vote for a help to “lazy” Greece if poor Slovaks have much lower pensions and income.

In the last parliamentary elections there were no politicians that would defend the European Union as a source of economic prosperity, but too many arguments were made how Brussels is threatening the Slovak identity, and to certain extent also national financial resources (because of Greek crisis).

The structure of political competition has reversed again to identity issues. Political campaign highlighted the “us versus them” divide, although this time it were lazy Greeks instead of expanding Czechs or Hungarians. Simultaneously, ugly Brussels is pushing Slovakia into uncomfortable political positions without providing satisfactory economic compensation. This type of public debate is deepening the gap between the part of society that feel their identity is threatened and the part that connects their identity with the EU. With the increased number of crises (refugees, democratic deficit, debt crisis, British exit, Ukrainian conflict, etc.) the possibilities to see Brussels as the “oppressor” rises as well. As this wedge goes deeper, it will be more and more difficult to make compromises within the society and reach agreements with the legendary “Brussels.”

Consequences for the next elections:

The next parliamentary election in Slovakia is held in March 2016. Based on our knowledge of the political competition structure, what can we expect in terms of electoral results, and its impact on European governance?

We know that the left-right dimension is not going to dominate in the elections. Aspelund, Lindeman and Verkasalo noted that “*conservatism can be related to left-wing or right-wing orientation depending on the cultural, political, and economic situation of the society in question.*” (2013: 409). The current election campaign shows this precisely. Prime Minister Fico is using the refugees crisis to appeal on people’s fear of losing their christian, white identity. The main motto of Smer-SD campaign is „We protect Slovakia.“ This brings identity back in the political game, while pointing at Brussels to be the one endangering it. This is in line with Slovak interior minister voting against the refugee quotas in September 2015 and with the government’s intention to sue the Council at the European Court of Justice. Simultaneously, the government, which basically means Smer-SD is introducing economic measures that, as analysts noted, might violate the fiscal rules of the EU.

Based on the opinion polls and the way political campaign is being done it is reasonable that Fico will be able to create another single-party government, or a government that would include just a minor partner. Once this happens, it will prove to political elites in Visegrad region that appeals to negative emotions in combination with economic corruption of selected voters is a sure way to dominate in the party system and maintain that position. However, this will represent obstacles to reaching an effective, unified and flexible decision-making in the EU.

Conclusions and Lessons for EU governance

Left-right socio-economic division has rarely, if ever, been dominant issue in the political competition in Slovakia. This is in line with some recent research of political preferences in post-communist Europe which suggest that even the meaning of the left-right division is unclear (Aspelund et al. 2013).

Since the standard left-right ideological divisions as we know them from Western Europe do not work in selected Central European countries, political parties had to find another way how to mobilise voters and persuade them to cast a vote for the right party. In Slovakia, the most

successful recipe seems to be emotional by appeal on fear of the collective, national identity being threatened.

Admittedly, the complete and exhaustive list of factors leading to a single-party government in Slovakia, and more so if we include the rest of Visegrad countries, would be much longer than the scope of this article can bear. However, the main argument is that Fico found a way how to communicate with the electorate by selling the following message: the collective identity is threatened, Brussels is more part of the problem than a solution, and Smer-SD is the most appropriate party to protect the nation.

But, if attacking the EU on values and fiscal rules is the only way how to get to power and maintain it, how can be the EU united, efficient and flexible in taking actions in regard to many challenges it faces?

Two suggestions will conclude this discussion paper. These are far from ready solutions and the reader should take these two points as stimuli for discussion, as the empirical implementation would need much more precision. Put simply, I set forth two principles the EU could adopt in a certain way so that the EU protects its own interests in Visegrad region.

First, the EU has long been blind to the double-faced political communication in the region. Politicians are used to blame the Union locally, and then travel to the Council meetings to Brussels and (most often) vote in favour of what they had criticised just moments before. Although it is a well-rooted principle not to intervene with national politics, the representatives of the European Commission or the European Parliament could make pressure on politicians to be consistent. A call for consistency between local rhetoric and in-Brussels actions could decrease the extent to which the national political elites can afford playing the blaming game.

Secondly, the appeals of nationalist and populist political parties are based on emotions, moreover, negative emotions. Therefore it is very difficult to argue with political parties such as Smer-SD in a rational way. Psychologists have long argued that preferences based on negative emotions are adopted faster than argument-based preference. Negative emotions can block cognitive abilities of a person (Zajonc 1962, 1980). Therefore, if the EU representatives would appeal on emotional issues, e.g. possible long-term consequences of the euro abolition or the EU dissolution, it might have much larger impact than referring to just rationality and economic arguments.

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