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Elite-Level Use of Ethnic Categories in Postsocialist Slovakia

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Abstract

This paper is a single-study of postsocialist ethnic identification in today's Slovakia rooted in post-Barthian approach to ethnicity. It deals with the ways in which ethnic categories, ethnic symbolism and ethnic interpretations were used in elite-level political mobilization during the 2012 electoral campaign focusing on the victorious party SMER-SD and parties of "the Slovak right". Audiovisual and written documents were examined using CAQDAS tools (MAXQDA) to identify what kinds of political issues were ethnicized, which ethnic symbols were used and what kind of ethnic out-group was emphasized in the campaign. Drawing from anthropological perspectives and models of ethnicity (stressing the negotiated, relational, performative and situational aspects) this paper seeks to find out whether ethnicity continues to provide a politically significant basis for identification and state-driven homogenization or is being replaced by other forms of discourses based on collective identities resonant with the ongoing neoliberal transformation of postsocialist Slovak politics. It tries to answer the question whether the instrumentally used ethnic Others are being transformed by these processes or whether essentialist ethnic categorization continues to be politically effective in Slovakia.

Keywords

postsocialism, Slovakia, ethnicization, situational ethnicity, neoliberalism

"I will vote for SDKÚ. I don't want to go to bed in the West and to wake up in the East."
Tomáš Janovic, writer

Neoliberal re-invention of postsocialist Slovakia

It may be essential to state this very clearly at the beginning of this paper at a conference focusing on Eastern Europe: Slovakia, as seen through the eyes of Slovak political and intellectual elites, is not a part of Eastern Europe. They would rather classify the country as Western, Central European or simply European. However, the East-West symbolic boundary has been socially effective in political mobilization in Slovakia ever since its foundation in 1993 and many agendas, measures and policies have been legitimized by referring to "pro-European" tendencies. The dominant neoliberal image and a basis for justifying politics is that of fragile and unstable geopolitical position: Slovakia is always on the road chasing Europe and fleeing the East, always in transition, backward, profoundly diseased and immature.

Nineteen years since the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and twenty-three years after the 1989 Velvet Revolution marking the collapse of the communist regime, Slovakia still struggles with market penetration and deals with qualitatively similar problems of postsocialist contexts as described by Humphrey and Mandel (2002) and others ten years ago. The attribute postsocialist remains relevant for the interpretation of Slovak politics as it continues to be framed in terms of post-1989 transformation and transition towards the West, Europe and global markets. Slovak society in this sense still cannot be understood without reference to the meanings, symbolic systems and practices of socialism (Hann 2002).

The postsocialist explanatory framework serves as a powerful source for justifying the complex and disorganized sets of measures leading to the subordination to the logics of markets and capitalism (Wolfe 2000). As it was clear also from the 2012 campaign, "reforms" to counter "backwardness" are everyday symbolic tools used in the Slovak political discourses to promote, legitimate and reproduce the logic of neoliberal governmentality that permeated Slovakia since the "neoliberal turn" effectuated in the period between 2002 and 2006 (Fisher, Gould and Haughton 2007). Nevertheless, the rapid changes brought by the economic, political and social transformations have faced discontents and resistance. I have argued elsewhere that the massive support of parties designated by political scientists as populist and nationalist such as LS-HZDSⁱ and SMER-SDⁱⁱ can be seen as one of such strategies of resistance against the perceived "earthshaking" changes (Burzova 2010). Elite-driven economic reforms and the state-authorized discourses of neoliberal legitimation alienated, marginalized and in many contexts even stigmatized all those who fall beyond the target populations of neoliberalism – the "losers of transition" is how we call them in sociological analyses (Bútorová and Gyárfášová 2009). These individuals and groups of individuals have been symbolically included in communities of nations offering narratives which have meaningfully reorganized the rapidly changing symbolic universes of postsocialist societies (Verdery 1999).

Until recently, elite-promoted ethnic categories have been politically effective in Slovakia. In the context of postsocialist conceptual instability they provided unshakeable bases for identification with the imagined community (Anderson 1991) based on blood. The perceived significance could be seen in the nationalist mobilization during the 2010 campaign for parliamentary electionsⁱⁱⁱ as well as in the 2009 presidential election campaign (Gyárfášová 2010 and 2012). The aim of this paper is to find out whether ethnic categories were used in the 2012 campaign for preliminary parliamentary elections or were, conversely, replaced by other kinds of essentialist collective identification manifested in electoral agendas. We will look at the ways how parties – in particular the most powerful party SMER-SD and “the Slovak right” – represent their audiences and potential voters, whether they think of them as of communities of shared essences, what kinds of significant out-groups they emphasize in mobilization and whether ethnic interpretation and legitimation is employed continuously or situationally. If ethnic framing proves to be significant in the 2012 campaign we will try to interpret the possible causes of its relevance.

Post-Barthian Boundaries after Socialism

This article draws upon the anthropological model of ethnicity (as summarized Jenkins 2008) which is based on assumptions partly formulated by Fredrik Barth in his 1969 introduction to the collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Although many valuable insights had been formulated much earlier by Max Weber (1978, 385-399), present major works in ethnicity studies often refer to Barth (1969) as the founding text of the subfield. The introduction presented an early form of what is today called relational and processual approach to ethnicity (Eriksen 2012, 74) and offered a conceptualization of ethnicity as a form of social organization of cultural difference. To understand ethnicity we do not need to concentrate on the “cultural stuff” of the “organizational vessel” but rather on the form – the social boundary itself which is produced during interaction by self-ascription and external categorization (Barth 1969, 9-38).

Barth’s conceptualization of ethnicity has been both influential and contested for its unintended reification of social groups (as indicated by the boundary metaphor itself, see Jenkins 2008, 22). Second, Barth’s model does not recognize the central role of the state as the most important source of imperative homogenization (Williams 1989) imposing ethnic categories as a part of authoritative or “dominant discourse” (Baumann 1999). It is exactly this level that will be of interest here – I will not seek to combine the perspective of nationalist politics (“from above”) with the “workings of everyday ethnicity” (Brubaker 2006), but rather focus on the elite-level use of ethnic categories to see whether these are represented and promoted as imperative framings of social organization or not (Verdery 1994, 39). The scope is thus limited to include only one aspect of postsocialist transformation that may serve to complement a detailed ethnographic account of the degree to which this dominant discourse actually is socially effective.

Questions, Method and Empirical Base

Based on this understanding of ethnic categorization, this paper thus seeks to find out whether ethnicity continues to provide a politically significant basis for identification and state-driven homogenization or is being replaced by other forms of discourses based on collective identities resonant with the ongoing neoliberal transformation of postsocialist Slovak politics. The next question is whether the instrumentally used ethnic out-groups are being transformed by these processes or whether essentialist ethnic categorization continues to be politically effective in Slovakia. These questions were studied at a corpus of textual and audiovisual statements produced by political parties during the 2012 electoral campaign. This corpus consisted of 1) a set of articles presented in one of the largest newspapers (SME^{iv}) tagged as 2012 elections (n=531; articles dating from January 1 to March 14, 2012, the actual election took place on March 10) to identify ethnic categories and ethnic interpretations promoted during the campaign; 2) secondary analyses by Slovak analysts and journalists as presented at the website dedicated to Slovak elections administered by the organization MEMO 98 (available at <http://www.infovolby.sk>) to check for possible missed ethnicized topics and 3) official textual and audiovisual campaign documents produced by political parties to identify the ways in which ethnic categories, ethnic symbolism and ethnic interpretations were used in elite-level mobilization during the 2012 electoral campaign focusing on the victorious party SMER-SD and “the Slovak right”.

These audiovisual and written documents were coded and examined using the MAXQDA software program. A combination of theory-driven and open coding was used to identify a selection of relevant codes organized in three sets 1) ethnic framing (ethnic interpretation, ethnic symbol, ethnic category), 2) codes for relevant political parties used when ethnic framing took place, 3) codes for political affiliation when ethnic framing took place, 4) codes for other in-groups and out-groups or Others used for political mobilization (ordinary people vs. political elites, Slovak citizens vs. Hungarian state, Church, the state vs. markets, conservative society vs. deviants, corruption, European Union, Gorilla, economic crisis, media, communists and socialists) and 5) official topics represented as characteristic for the parties during the campaign (stability,

security, Europe, economic growth, paternalism, state and regulation, market economy, Slovakia, socialism, Greece, social benefits, Roma).

Campaign

The early 2012 parliamentary election was held on March 10, just 21 months after the 2010 regular parliamentary election. It was announced after the fall of the government in October 2011 caused by the absence of consensus on the euro zone bailout fund expansion. In fact, the government led by Iveta Radičová connected the bailout vote to a confidence motion and was toppled by the Slovak parliament. Without offering a political analysis, we can say that the campaign was largely framed by classic rightist-leftist categories referring to the opposed political identities of relevant parties (SMER-SD versus “the Slovak right”). Although analysts estimated a low level of participation provoked by the Gorilla affair (see below), the turnout was even higher than in 2010 (for summary results see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Six parties crossed the 5 % threshold to the Slovak parliament: the victorious leftist SMER-SD (44, 41 % of valid votes) and the bloc of five small rightist parties referred to as “the Slovak right” in political debates (36, 23 % of valid votes).

INDICATOR	SR in total
ABSOLUTE INDICATORS	
Number of voters registered in electoral registers	4 392 451
Number of voters who participated in voting	2 596 443
Number of voters who sent return envelopes from abroad	7 051
Number of voters who returned envelopes pursuant to Section 30 of the Act No. 333/2004 (Coll.) on Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic as amended, i.e. cast their vote personally	2 587 198
Total number of valid votes cast	2 553 726
RELATIVE INDICATORS	
Voter turnout in elections in %	59,11
Share of return envelopes sent from abroad in %	0,27
Share of returned envelopes pursuant to Section of the Act No. 333/2004 (Coll.) on Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic as amended, in %	99,64
Share of total valid votes cast in %	98,43

Figure 1: Summary voting results for the Slovak Republic

(Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, <http://app.statistics.sk/nrsr2012/menu/indexV.jsp?lang=en>, April 16, 2012)

POLITICAL PARTY	Number	Number of valid votes	Share of valid votes in %	Number of seats
Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie	2	225 361	8,82	16
OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti	5	218 537	8,55	16
Sloboda a Solidarita	6	150 266	5,88	11
SMER – sociálna demokracia	11	1 134 280	44,41	83
MOST – HÍD	16	176 088	6,89	13
Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – Demokratická strana	22	155 744	6,09	11

Figure 2: Number and share of valid votes for political parties and assignment of seats to political parties

(Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, <http://app.statistics.sk/nrsr2012/menu/indexV.jsp?lang=en>, April 16, 2012)

The campaign was affected by several events that happened after the early election was announced, the most important of these being the Gorilla affair (“Kauza Gorila”). The affair concerned the biggest of high-ranking political scandals involving wiretapping of journalists, secret recording of politicians and private entrepreneurs and public posting of transcripts and regular leaks of classified documents showing elite corruption and led to unprecedented protests throughout Slovak cities lasting from the end of January to the beginning of March 2012. The scandal and the protests it provoked established the problem of legitimacy of representative democracy, corruption and distrust as core topics in the public discourse. Nevertheless, political parties chose not to directly respond to the protests, they rather stuck to other issues set by their electoral agenda. However, three symbolic strategies can be viewed as indirectly answering the disorganization of political imaginaries among voters: SMER’s emphasis on stability opposed to the rapid and chaotic events, the stressing of purity by new parties and politicians opposed to old, corrupted and dirty politicians and the overcommunication of the Roma/Gypsy issue^v by “the Slovak right”.

Ethnic Other: Roma/Gypsies and Hungarians

Contrary to the previous campaign the major SMER-SD avoided significant use of ethnic and national categories in 2012 and remained largely ethnically indifferent despite the potentially significant controversies

spurred by the dual citizenship (Gyárfášová 2012). This fact had a certain amount of influence on the overall shape of the campaign in which the strongest SMER-SD set the uncontroversial left-right conflict as the most important dividing line of the Slovak political scene (seen as a struggle between the left represented by SMER-SD and the right represented by SDKÚ, KDH, OĽaNO, SaS and MOST-HÍD). However, ethnic framing was used by minor ethnically defined parties (parties whose electorates are what is understood as ethnic communities or ethnic groups) that is nationalist SNS^{vi} and parties seeking to represent the numerous Hungarian minority SMK-MKP and MOST-HÍD^{vii} as well as other parties of “the Slovak right”. When applied, the Roma/Gypsy category was used as essential and biologically determined. On the contrary, the Hungarian category is seen as changeable and associated with culture and loyalty to the state and expressed through the use of language. For example, the head of MOST-HÍD said that “Hungarians” in fact decreased in number by assimilation (Hilbertová 2012) which is not an option for the racially delimited Roma/Gypsies.

The Roma issue has been used and emphasized ever since the penetration of neoliberal governmentality. The immutable (biologically determined) category is most often associated with negative stigmatization and used instrumentally to mobilize those who struggle with the logic of markets and/or suffer its consequences (symbolically framed as economic crisis and the crisis of the welfare state). We can quote Bourdieu who observed the effects of neoliberalism – marked among other things by withdrawing of the state from social service sector – on marginalized groups in French society (and the actual victims of the system) and those who deal with them (“the left hand of the state”). One of the strategies of neoliberal political elites is to explain the complex realities by the logic of the markets which is a rationalization that naturally depicts those who apparently do not work, are not in economically productive age or are handicapped in one way or another as the cause of the perceived worsening economic situation (see Figures 3, 4 and 5). During the campaign, the Roma/Gypsies were used as this cause. This label associates what has long been understood as visible aliens and the biologically determined Other with the meaning of “those who do not want to work and those who only take benefits”. Politically dispensable (Gypsies/Roma are not considered to be a politically significant group of voters whose support should be mobilized in campaigns – after all, if necessary, Roma/Gypsy votes can only be bought), Gypsies/Roma served as the counterpart to the elite Other uncovered by the Gorilla scandal in the context of neoliberal economic rationalization of Slovak reality as “[t]hese are beliefs which politicians end up believing to be universally shared by their electors.” (Bourdieu 1998, 17) Together with SMER’s focus on corporations and big financial enterprises (such as banks) as powerful perpetrators of economic inequalities, the representatives of “corrupted political elites” (or “Gorillas” in the words of protesters) emphasized the Roma/Gypsy interpretation of the economic crisis. Hardly surprising in this line of interpretation was the Roma/Gypsy framing used by SaS, the most explicitly neoliberal party engaged in one of the major corruption scandals.



Figure 3: Billboard of SaS in the 2012 electoral campaign reading “The Future Is: Work and Benefits” referring to the idea of reduced welfare state.

(Source: www.infolby.sk/index.php?base=data/parl/2012/kandidati/kampan/1329039046.txt, April 16, 2012)



Figure 4: Billboard of SDKÚ in the 2012 electoral campaign reading “The Rules Apply for Everyone” referring to Roma/Gypsies who “only claim benefits, do not work and violate the law”. The reference was made explicit by placing the picture of Roma/Gypsy settlement in the background.

(Source: <http://www.infolby.sk/index.php?base=data/parl/2012/kandidati/kampan/1329037747.txt>, April 16, 2012)



Figure 5: Billboard of KDH in the 2012 electoral campaign reading “Stronger Slovakia: It Begins with Work” referring to the idea of reduced welfare state.

(Source: <http://www.infovolby.sk/index.php?base=data/parl/2012/kandidati/kampan/1329039668.txt>, April 16, 2012)

Nations and Europe: Slovak Sovereignty

In general, the conflict between national and European identification was not used in the campaign although the early election was caused by the lack of consensus on the participation of Slovakia in the eurozone financial mechanisms. Some parties, namely SaS, stressed the priority of national and state interests over the interests of Europe and tried to profit from the Greek crisis, in general political parties did avoid detailed discussion on the role of Slovakia in Europe and rather expressed the need for pro-European policies. This can be understood in the context of postsocialist Slovakia where the membership in European Union represented the desired Western orientation toward the idealized version of more civilized world. Europe is one of the symbols of postsocialist freedom and rarely any party (except of the explicitly eurosceptic SaS and SNS, see Gyárfášová 2012) challenges this meaning of Europe in political discourse. Rather, parties set the symbol of Europe as a goal in itself: Slovakia must always keep track with the dynamic Europe on its progressive road to prosperous future. SMER-SD state in their programme that Europe must be the framework from which modernization of all aspects of the society must stem. To sum up, Europe as a potential threat to Slovakness was not among the tools used in mobilization.

Markets and Moralities: Communists, Socialists and Neoliberal Futures

Postsocialist symbolic narratives were used to interpret the need to vote for or against parties rooted in neoliberal governmentality or those opposing it. It is within this framework that the leftist SMER-SD is categorized as an undesirable and dangerous force of the communist past. To illustrate this way of reasoning let us quote the head of the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH), Ján Fígel:

“Former communists and socialists fail today. They wish to lead Slovakia back to the measures of yesterday, from the past years. But these are the measures that have recently knocked down Greece and that threaten the economies and the living standards anywhere in Europe and in the world [...] We cannot accept the socialist tendency of the Greek type. We must follow a free and responsible road to a stronger, modern and developed, European Slovakia.” (SITA 2012)

In the eyes of “the Slovak right” the road to prosperous future is based on free market and on such measures that “increase personal responsibility for one’s own well-being and that seek to dismantle institutions that socialise the risk of failure in the economy” (Fisher, Gould and Haughton 2007 on the basis of David Harvey’s conceptualization of neoliberalism). Neoliberal logic is enabled and legitimized by itself as the free market paradigm has been a potential symbol of the victory over the totalitarian and oppressive communist regime characterized by centrally planned economy. While SMER-SD opted for “stability” and “security” as their slogans (See Figure 6 showing the party leader Robert Fico with a call “Let us vote for security”) referring to the state regulation of markets and protectionist approach to populations affected by economic crises and market penetration, “the Slovak right” supports more or less deregulated markets leading to economic growth of the Slovak economy seen as a collective unit that will – when “healed” in future – create the conditions for private sector who will enable the prosperity of individuals by giving them work.



Figure 6: Billboard of SMER-SD in the 2012 electoral campaign

(Source: <http://www.infolby.sk/index.php?base=data/parl/2012/kandidati/kampan/1329038652.txt>, April 16, 2012)

Stability and the Crisis of Political Elites

The campaign was marked by several scandals (see above) that provoked protests across Slovakia and even among Slovak citizens living abroad. The scandals established new understandings as well as categories. First of all, politicians as a group or a social class have been discredited by the leaked evidence of high-level corruption and the neoliberal marriage of private actors with state representatives that subordinated the state to the interests of markets. One of the promoted strategies of resistance was to ignore classic mechanisms of democracy, participate in protest rallies and not to vote.

Although SMER-SD did not directly respond to the emerging discourse produced during the rallies, they proposed the solution of a “stable government” that would form a solid base to tackle all pressing problems. As was stated in their electoral programme: “Slovakia cannot afford another attempt of a governing coalition that would be unstable.”

It is within this context that a boundary is erected transcending all mentioned and formerly significant identity bases such as ethnicity, political identity or social class: it is the participation in politics and the respective stigmatization reflected in the metaphors of dirt. This emerging discourse establishes politicians as corrupted and essentially dirty (Gyárfášová 2012), opens the space for new (and therefore pure) parties and personalities, and makes established parties reinterpret their policies so that they can be viewed as pure. Thus Igor Matovič, the leader of the new party illustratively entitled Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti) argued:

“After 22 years it is time that we give the positions in the public administration to experts selected in open competitions and that offices are occupied by the most important experts and not those individuals who are the most loyal to their party friends.” (TASR 2012)

It is clear from this quotation that the Velvet Revolution still represents an effective symbol of the beginning (point of departure) of a new era making interpretations rooted in postsocialism studies still useful for the context of Slovakia. However, we must keep in mind that neither postsocialism nor neoliberalism refer to homogeneous realities (Rogers 2010).

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to find out whether ethnic categories and ethnic interpretations have been used by political elites during the 2012 campaign in the way that reproduces ethnicity as imperative in the dominant discourse. The analysis showed that ethnic framing was politically significant in the campaign although avoided by the major party SMER-SD. It is important to stress that both the presence and the absence of effective ethnic framing reflects the situational character of ethnicity which is employed only in those contexts in which it is not only culturally relevant (and specific ethnic categories are culturally available) but also socially and politically significant (that is, they have effect on social interactions and political preferences). It follows that although reduced in significance by SMER-SD, it seems that the ideology of ethnicity will be reproduced in the future as it can be used instrumentally and in accordance with the economic rationalization of the dominant neoliberal discourse imposing a “renegotiation of state-society relations” (Stahler-Sholk 2007). In addition to the ethnic Other, two kinds of essentialized Other emerged in the campaign that may influence the mobilization of electoral support also in the future: the socialists (communists, representatives of the East) and corrupted political elites. These categories bear negative stigmatization that is immutable: communists are essentially reactionary and politicians essentially dirty. However, new ways of contestation through protests promoting the third category has been sidelined as illegitimate or even damaging to the democratic procedures by some commentators.

The success of SMER-SD as well as the volume of Gorilla protests seems to show that many people in Slovakia chose to resist the neoliberal discourse of “the Slovak right”. According to the overall results, we can say that ethnic framing and the most controversial Roma/Gypsy category on one hand is consistent with neoliberalism and, on the other, failed to attract sufficient support among Slovak voters of rightist parties.

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Biographical Note

Petra Burzova obtained her Ph.D. in ethnology in September 2010 at the Department of Anthropology, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. Her thesis entitled *Slovak Nation, Nationalism and Nationing: Beyond Groupism with Groups* was supervised by Dr Marek Jakoubek. She has worked as lecturer at the Department of Politics and International Relations since 2010 and as investigator at the Department of Anthropology since 2012. Her academic interests include theories of ethnicity, Czechoslovak identification and postsocialist neoliberal transformation in Slovakia. She has also participated in the Studio of Visual Ethnography at the anthropology department where she focuses on photography.

ⁱ Ludová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko [People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia].

ⁱⁱ SMER – sociálna demokracia [Direction – Social Democracy].

ⁱⁱⁱ Apparently, before the parliamentary elections in June 2010, nationalist policies such as the Patriotic Act or the Dual Citizenship Act barring Slovak citizenship for those who apply for citizenship in another country did not meet with mass success. These kinds of indifference towards nationalist policies can be understood in terms of "symbolic ethnicity" introduced by Herbert Gans (1996): if the situation does not coerce them, people identify symbolically rather than act ethnically in their everyday interactions.

^{iv} The newspaper was chosen because it has defined itself as "rightist" and is known for criticism of SMER-SD as well as various explicit forms of nationalism. I assumed that the newspaper would not miss any chance to inform about all relevant cases of ethnicization during the examined period. Nevertheless, any larger newspaper could be used as all published rather detailed news on the campaign.

^v The Roma issue is an umbrella term referring to socio-political difficulties attributed to those classified in the Roma ethnic category. 'Roma' are often seen as inadaptable to the principles of European legal and civic cultures and as disrespecting obligations arising from the welfare capitalist logic of the European Union. In other words, they are perceived as abusers of the welfare system. The use of the Roma category has been criticized, i.a. by several central-European social scientists, most notably by Jakoubek, who has argued that the term 'Roma' is misused because empirical research has undermined the social existence of a homogeneous Roma group (e.g. Jakoubek and Budilová 2009).

^{vi} Slovenská národná strana [Slovak National Party].

^{vii} Strana maďarskej koalície – Magyar Koalíció Pártja [Party of the Hungarian Coalition] and MOST-HÍD [Bridge].