



# **Forward to the Past:** a comparative analysis of Slovakia's and Poland's parliamentary elections

Latte

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Two weeks and the Tatra Mountains apart, two elections took place in the fall of 2023 that shook the foundations of the (Central) European political landscape. On September 30, Slovakia put an end to three bitter years of conflictual politics under the on-and-off leadership of Igor Matovič when it voted Robert Fico, the country's controversial and increasingly pro-Russian political matador, back into office. Then, come mid-October, Poland woke up to ballot results that offered a glimpse of possibility that the near decade-long, authoritarian-leaning rule of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) could be replaced with a more democratic alternative led by the well-known figure of Donald Tusk. From an outsider point of view, the outcomes could not have been more different: one country signaled a willingness to return to the rule of law and European values while the other decided to roll back whatever steps it took on its path toward democracy and the West. Such was the overwhelming message found in Western media, anyway. This makes sense: in light of the War in Ukraine and a general growth of anti-Western revisionism around the world, it mattered a great deal on which side the two countries would find themselves after the elections were over. That being said, there was *more* to the elections than this – something the predominantly geopolitical reading of the election, while no doubt crucial, risks obscuring. After all, for all the difference, the elections can equally be read as *returning to the past*, as both countries decided to go forward with prime ministers they already knew (Robert Fico in Slovakia, possibly Donald Tusk in Poland). This kind of nuanced look is what we seek to offer: without ignoring the geopolitical dimension, we provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of the two elections that goes beyond the 'usual take'.

To that end, we proceed as follows. Analyzing each country separately (first Slovakia, then Poland), we begin by offering an overview of both the legal-constitutional and contextual background in which the election took place. After that, we analyze the election itself, focusing on three dimensions: discourses, visuals, and disinformation. We conclude each country section by describing and interpreting the immediate aftermath. Closing the paper as a whole, we offer a rundown of the most important difference and similarities between the two elections. Throughout the paper, we draw on a range of mostly primary sources, including social media posts and newspaper articles. Importantly, we make an extensive use of original CEDMO data collected in Slovakia and Poland in cooperation with IPSOS during July 2023. The data were collected using the CASI method and representative samples of ~1000 respondents.

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# Slovakia

## I. Background: the constitutional framework

Constitutionally speaking, Slovakia is a standard parliamentary democracy – that is, a country where the supreme executive power is vested in a government which both derives and is accountable to a popularly elected legislature. In this case, the legislature is a unicameral, 150-seat body called the *National Council* that is elected every four years through a system of proportional representation. Unlike countries with plurality systems, Slovaks do not vote for individual candidates but rather for individual *parties*. Each party is then allocated seats through a specific formula that divides the total number of votes a party receives by the number of votes necessary for every one seat in the Council. As is the case in many such systems, a party needs to gain at least 5 % of the total amount of votes to qualify for a place in the legislature (for a coalition of 2-3 parties, the threshold is 7 %). What makes Slovakia stand out is that it only has one, nation-wide electoral district – an option generally thought to maximize the representativeness of electoral results and prevent the use of gerrymandering (the Netherlands is another example of a single-district country).<sup>[2]</sup>

By far the most consequential outcome of Slovakia's parliamentary elections is the eventual formation of government. As a rule, the party – or rather *parties*, as single-party governments rarely obtain – that commands the majority of MPs in the Council is the one to form the cabinet. However, before that can happen, the popularly-elected president of the country must appoint an MP and formally task her with the formation. While the president need not choose the leader of the of the winning party, it is usually the case.<sup>[3]</sup> That does not mean that the president's role is strictly formalistic. For instance, she has a de facto *veto* power over the appointment of individual cabinet members as no minister may assume office without being officially sworn in by the president.<sup>[4]</sup> But at the end of the day, whether a government emerges or not is mostly a function of whether it secures the confidence of the National Council. If the parties of a prospective government command a majority, this is usually a given. However, the confidence may be withdrawn at any time, especially if the coalition parties fall out, as happened twice during the last parliamentary term. Such a situation results either in the formation of a new government or, if no longer possible, a snap election.

Once formed, the Slovak national government becomes the country's supreme executive body, receiving vast prerogatives over both domestic- and foreign-policy matters. While it is not necessary to enumerate the entire gamut, it pays to highlight the government's control over the country's economy (Ministries of Economy, Finance and other), internal security and prosecution (Ministry of Interior), judiciary (Ministry of Justice), schooling (Ministry of Education) as well as its external relations and security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defense). These responsibilities gained elevated significance during the 2023 election in light of the socio-political, economic and international context in which they took place (next section). However, the parliamentary elections are *generally* considered the country's most important ballot, as evident from a voter turnout that has historically exceeded 80 % and, even at the lowest, never dipped significantly below 60 %.<sup>[5]</sup> With 68,5 % of the electorate turning up, the 2023

election was no different in this respect – despite the fact that more than half of the population did not expect much change no matter who eventually won and expected that there would be some form of election fraud.[\[6\]](#)

## **II. Background: the context and stakes**

The election was watched closely not only in Slovakia and its immediate neighborhood but also in the West more generally, where it normally would have been overlooked. A headline from a news piece by *The Nation* exemplifies this nicely, dubbing the ballot the “Most Important Election You Haven’t Heard About”.[\[7\]](#) For more frequent observers, there had been other important elections in the country’s history – such as those that put an end to the rule of Vladimír Mečiar, an authoritarian PM that governed Slovakia for much of the 1990s (then the turnout reached 84 %). That said, the truth is that a number of factors did elevate the importance of the 2023 ballot.

### ***War in Ukraine and Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation***

Perhaps the most crucial reason the election garnered heightened attention outside Slovakia was that it took place in the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine. The war was not necessarily the hottest or the only electoral topic inside Slovakia – only about half of the population considered the issue ‘very important’ when deciding for whom to vote and, as we will see below, it was not a theme that singlehandedly dominated the parties’ campaigns.[\[8\]](#) However, the relevance of the war could hardly be overstated as the election had the potential of upending the country’s geopolitical orientation. In common with other Central and Eastern European countries, Slovakia was one of the nations that stood by Ukraine from day one of the invasion. To date, the country has provided Ukraine with millions of Euros worth of humanitarian and military aid, making it the sixth largest donor relative to GDP worldwide.[\[9\]](#) Slovakia’s president Zuzana Čaputová, alongside Czech president Pavel, also personally visited Ukraine and met with president Zelensky to convey a message of continued support and endorse the country’s bid for an EU membership.[\[10\]](#) Notably, Slovakia joined Poland in supplying Ukraine with its Soviet-era Mig-29 fighter jets, sending its entire fleet of 13.[\[11\]](#)

With the upcoming elections, there were fears that Slovakia’s position could be reversed. Signs that the country’s geopolitical orientation was not set in stone had become apparent already earlier. The signature of the country’s Agreement on Defense Cooperation (DCA) with the USA in early 2022 showed just how the Slovak society was polarized on the West-East question – more than 50 % of the population was opposed to the agreement.[\[12\]](#) In April 2023, Slovakia also joined a club of Eastern European countries banning the import of Ukraine’s grain, undermining the semblance of unequivocal support in the war.[\[13\]](#) However, in the run-up to the election, the fears gained immediate urgency as a number of political parties – including the poll favorite SMER and a number of far-right and fascist movements – campaigned on openly pro-Russian and anti-Western platforms. If these forces were to prevail, as they eventually did, the chances were high that Slovakia would join Hungary and tilt ever closer to Russia, weakening the West’s already withering support for Ukraine.[\[14\]](#)

## ***Economic turbulence and social disintegration***

An equally important context was a dire socio-economic situation in the country. Battered by the economic outfall of both the Covid pandemic and the War in Ukraine, Slovakia's economy was considered by many to be in a bad place: its annual growth was unremarkable while the national debt kept soaring.<sup>[15]</sup> It had also undergone a period of high inflation, reaching 15 % for a number of months in a row.<sup>[16]</sup> This inevitable had an impact on the economic situation of the country's population. As our data showed, almost 60 % of Slovaks reported finding it hard to get by financially in 2023.<sup>[17]</sup> While most could afford the daily necessities, the majority of the population had little to no money to spare such 'extras' as a vacation abroad, which only about one in four Slovaks could afford.<sup>[18]</sup> Many people were also pessimistic about their future prospects – more than half of the population thought it was impossible or near impossible to improve their economic situation.<sup>[19]</sup> To make matters worse, Slovakia also continued to suffer from a major brain drain as its youth left to study and make a living in foreign countries like the Czech Republic.<sup>[20]</sup> Unsurprisingly, tackling the economic hardships would become one of the key themes of the campaigning parties, no doubt in response to the fact that almost two thirds of Slovaks expressed hope that the election would help resolve the situation.<sup>[21]</sup>

Hand in glove with the economic turmoil was worsening social disintegration. As our CEDMO reports regularly demonstrated, in the year before the election, Slovaks were losing trust in the state and its basic institutions across a range of indicators. For instance, only 1 % of the population reported being fully satisfied with the state of their democracy (less than 10 % were somewhat satisfied).<sup>[22]</sup> Three fourths of the population also found politicians largely unaccountable and thought that the justice system did not treat people fairly.<sup>[23]</sup> Nearly 60 % of Slovaks said that media lied. Put together, such indicators painted a picture of a country whose fabric of society was wearing thin; a society that found it increasingly difficult to agree on a common frame of reference. This not only helped make the electoral campaign fraught and polarized but also made it easier for disinformation to have effect (see below).

## ***Political turmoil and the specter of a resurgent mafia state***

The final key context of the election – as well as a contributing factor to the disintegrating social cohesion – was (a sense of) overall political turmoil and chaos after the conflictual politics of the last parliamentary term. In 2018, the murder of Ján Kuciak, a journalist investigating links between state structures and organized crime in Slovakia, and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová, ushered in a major societal upheaval. Tens of thousands of people (the highest numbers since the end of Communism 30 years before) took to the street to demand a change in the longstanding political hegemony of Robert Fico and SMER– forces then seen as intimately intertwined with the political climate that made the killings possible.<sup>[24]</sup> The pressure culminated in the 2020 elections that resulted in the victory of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'ANO), a populist party led by the self-proclaimed anti-corruption activist Igor Matovič. A new four-party coalition government (OL'ANO, Sme Rodina, SaS, Za L'udí) was formed with Matovič as the Prime Minister. Commanding a wide societal support – 95 out of the 150 seats in the Council – the expectations were high that the government would bring about a much-needed change. Despite some optimistic developments – notably police investigations

into the state-mafia connections and subsequent prosecutions of involved politicians – the hopes never really materialized.<sup>[25]</sup> Instead, the government became mired in near-constant bickering and infighting, resulting in its collapse only a year later. Its second iteration, now under the leadership of PM Eduard Heger, collapsed the year after and was replaced by care-taker government that would administer the country before a snap election was held.

It is evident from our data above that, more than anything, the last three years left Slovakia with a palpable sense of frustration with democratic politics.<sup>[26]</sup> This significantly increased the stakes of the election because it offered an opening for SMER and other political forces of the past to mount a return. If this came to pass, it was feared that the state-mafia connections would become ever more entrenched as a SMER-led government would likely halt any ongoing or future attempts to eradicate them.<sup>[27]</sup> This would set Slovakia on the path of the past, portending a return of Mečiar-like authoritarianism and corruption. With the Western-oriented and liberal president Čaputová, after years of sustained hateful attacks against her and her family, deciding not to run again in 2024, this danger became only the more pronounced.

### III. Analysis of the election

Having presented the constitutional-legal and contextual background of the election, the paper now turns to analyze the election itself. It proceeds in three steps. First, it examines the most important themes and topics of the electoral campaign, focusing mostly, but not exclusively, on the **discourses** of three parties that scored the most votes. These include SMER, a former social-democratic hegemon of Slovakia's politics, led by Robert Fico, mounting a dramatically far-right-leaning return; Hlas-SD, a splinter party from SMER, led by former PM Peter Pellegrini, seeking to portray itself as a nationally-oriented social democratic force; and Progressive Slovakia (PS), a Western-styled progressive-liberal movement under the leadership of Michal Šimečka, an Oxford-educated former Vice-President of the European Parliament. Second, the section zooms in on how the parties led their campaigns also **visually**, overviewing a selection of the most noteworthy representations. Finally, the section provides an overview of the **disinformation** situation around the election, focusing on the overall landscape as well as Russian influence.

#### III-A. Discourses

While a Western reading of the 2023 Slovak parliamentary election might give the impression that Slovakia's geopolitical position was all the election was about, this paper wishes to demonstrate that it was merely *one* important topic and not necessarily the most salient one. Rather, the campaign exhibited at least three salient themes that featured commonly, albeit differently, in the narratives of the three main political competitors. Loosely reflecting the already-described contextual background, the themes can be categorized as: *Chaos vs Stability*, *East vs West*, and *Old vs New*. This section presents each of these in turn with the slight caveat that, in practice, the themes often blurred into one another.

## ***Chaos vs Stability***

Breaking the mold with much commentary on the election, we contend that perhaps *the* major theme of the election was the question of chaos and stability. After a series of crises and the failure of successive governments, a dominant message of the three main parties' campaigns was that Slovakia was in a disarray and that the primary task of the election winner would be to 'save' the country from a number of threats. The parties mostly agreed on the analysis. Hlas' Pellegrini would often say that "Slovakia has been through hard times...total amateurism, chaos, decay, societal tension."[\[28\]](#) SMER party members would concur, blaming "three helpless governments that brought Slovakia into turmoil and instability."[\[29\]](#) As would PS, with Šimečka frequently pointing out how "Matovič's chaos and incompetence caused the erosion of trust in democratic politics" and "deprived many people of hope".[\[30\]](#) However, the recipes the three parties offered differed significantly: while SMER and Hlas chose a *backward-looking* approach, PS would make a *future-oriented* case.

The ***backward-looking*** approach of **SMER** and **Hlas** stressed the return to 'good old' times when Slovakia, under various SMER-led governments, was still a safe and stable country. Now, the situation was anything but – both parties went to great distances to emphasize how the incumbent governments left the country unprecedentedly vulnerable to the twin dangers of *migration* and *economic hardships*. "They failed to protect the country against illegal migration" or "the situation Slovakia faces in respect to illegal migration is critical" were common tropes of SMER politicians.[\[31\]](#) They featured equally often in the narratives of Hlas: "Stop migration," said Pellegrini, "we are no banana republic."[\[32\]](#) At the same time, Slovak citizens were frequently said to be at an extraordinary risk of descending into poverty.[\[33\]](#) To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, the two parties argued, it was necessary to go back to the time-tested "expertise and experience" their politicians represented – not some "immature experiments" offered by progressives such as PS.[\[34\]](#) This was neatly encapsulated in the two parties' slogans: SMER's "stability, order, and social assurances" left little doubt that the 'old halcyon days' was the overarching theme of its campaign. Hlas, for its part – possibly in an attempt to differentiate itself from the party it had broken away from – put forward a vision that went beyond this. Under the banner of "strong state", it promised to bring about, in five years, a "country where things work [...] people feel safe, trust state institutions [...] and know that if things go wrong, the state will be there to help."[\[35\]](#) Complementing that, the party also wanted to emphasize that they were not advocating for a return to the insolent or rude style of politics many may have associated with former SMER governments but rather a more decent and constructive approach.[\[36\]](#) As Pellegrini put it, "the election must not be about who yells louder, bangs the table more forcefully or calls on you to vote against something. It is high time we vote for decency, professionalism and experience that we offer."[\[37\]](#)

The approach of SMER and Hlas may be contrasted with the significantly more ***future-oriented*** one of Progressive Slovakia. Just like the two, it saw that the situation was grim, but argued that, instead of going back, the solution lay in going forward.[\[38\]](#) "We understand the frustration that many of you feel", explained Šimečka, but "do not lose hope: together we can reject the past and elect a better future for Slovakia."[\[39\]](#) In the PS narrative, the country did not have to choose between a Mečiar-styled past and the chaotic present. Both were an unpalatable option: "the politicians in the past hurt Slovakia more than enough – mostly those from SMER, SNS, but also the whole posse of chaos of Igor Matovič."[\[40\]](#) The country should best leave all of these behind and opt instead for a government that would be

“reform-minded, stable, pro-European”.[41] To make its case, PS sought to present the election as a pivotal moment in the country’s historical trajectory:

“We are at a crucial civilization juncture. Collectively we decide if we go back to the past, where there is international isolation, rude vocabulary and incessant fights with imaginary enemies. Or we choose the future and collectively begin to create something worthy and wonderful. A future where justice reigns, not shaming. A future where love is more than hate. A future where decency wins.”[42]

With the slogan “I vote the future”, PS claimed to be the force to make this future happen.

### ***East vs West***

None of the foregoing should be interpreted as to suggest that the question of Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation between the West and the East did not matter in the election. Far from it: how Slovakia should approach its international relations was clearly a major theme of the campaigns, most vividly demonstrated in the different parties’ views on the War in Ukraine. As noted, the country’s continued support for its invaded neighbor seemed in doubt due to high polling of a number of openly *pro-Russian* voices. We now unpack these in more detail and contrast them with the narrative of PS, the only openly *pro-Western* party of the ‘big three’.

For a country in a direct vicinity of Europe’s most vicious armed conflict since World War II, ***pro-Russian*** platforms were prominent in the election run-up. The case of **SMER** is instructive. After being voted out of office in 2020, the former social democrats rebranded themselves as a far-right, nationalist movement that leaned much closer to Russia than the US or NATO. This was evident even before the hot phases of the election. In early 2022, SMER politicians held or attended a series of public protests against the signature of Slovakia’s defense agreement with the US. Infamously, during one such gathering, Ľuboš Blaha – the party’s principal ideologue who is as much in favor of present-day Russia as he is of the Soviet past – spurred on the protesters to chant that president Čaputová was a “traitor”, an “American agent” or even “American whore” (something even some SMER politicians sought to distance themselves from).[43] As the campaign progressed, similar (pro)Russian narratives became one of the hallmarks of SMER’s approach. For instance, the party would frequently peddle the view that arming Ukraine was only prolonging the suffering and would not help Ukraine win anyway.[44] As Fico put it, further armament would “lead to additional tens and hundreds of thousands of dead people and, even so, they will eventually have to sit down and work out a deal.”[45] For that reason, if SMER was to form a government, “not one additional bullet” would be sent to Ukraine.[46] The party also vehemently opposed the prospect of Ukraine’s NATO membership as it would “pave the way for a global conflict that would impact everyone, including countries like Slovakia that for a long time seek to foster good relations with all the world’s sides”. [47] It was common to hear speculations during the campaign about the degree to which SMER’s pro-Russian turn was honest or just a pragmatic strategy to mount its return. Be that as it may, it did sit well with its audience: 60 % of professed SMER voters saw Russia as Slovakia’s most important partner and 37 % wished for its victory in the war (only 5 % wanted Ukraine to win).[48]



The pro-Russian discourse was echoed and amplified also by other, often even more extreme political players. A good example is **Republika**, a far-right movement composed of former members of the neo-nazi People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). Although the movement eventually did not score seats in the Council, throughout 2023 it consistently polled at around 8 %.<sup>[49]</sup> A common trope peddled by its politicians was the view that Slovakia should shed its pro-Western, pro-American orientation and opt instead for a more “four-dimensional approach” to foreign policy.<sup>[50]</sup> Like SMER, the movement also promised to “stop arms deliveries to Ukraine”.<sup>[51]</sup> Finally, the Russian affinity was most clearly evident in discourses of **Slovak National Party** (SNS), an ultranationalist party that unexpectedly made its way to the Council and then also the government. On the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the party posted on their Facebook the following statement:

“SNS perceives the steps taken by Vladimir Putin as inevitable [...] His actions are directly proportional to the pressure exerted also by Slovakia by allowing the placement of foreign armed forces in its territory [...] President Putin acted the way he did to protect the lives and wellbeing of Russian citizens at the Russo-Ukrainian border. Unless there is a peace between the US and Russian Federation, a catastrophe threatens Europe for which also Slovakia's leadership would be to blame.”<sup>[52]</sup>

Turning to the *pro-Western* side, **Progressive Slovakia** was the only high-polling party to campaign on an openly pro-Western, pro-Ukraine platform. While Hlas tried to pragmatically stay away from the topic as much as possible – again, perhaps to show its difference from SMER – PS was unequivocal. Tapping into their future-oriented approach, the party painted the question of Slovakia's geopolitical orientation in much the same terms: “do we see our future in the democratic Europe, in the EU and NATO, or will we go down the path of isolation and a growing affinity toward the dictatorail Russia which is murdering innocent people right across our borders?”.<sup>[53]</sup> For PS, the choice was clear, as it was for its voters: 92 % of them saw the EU as Slovakia's close partner, 86 % NATO and only 4 % Russia.<sup>[54]</sup> That being so, the party unsurprisingly openly pledged to support Ukraine's membership bid in the EU, announced they would continue to send the country humanitarian, military and other types of aid, and would stand by the EU sanctions regime on Russia.<sup>[55]</sup>

PS was not completely alone in its orientation, however. The center-right **Freedom and Solidarity** (SaS) or the **Christian Democratic Movement** (KDH) equally stood by the pro-Western orientation and supported Ukraine. While these scored significantly lesser gains in the elections (6,3 % and 6,8 %, respectively), it is necessary to at least mention them in this context to ensure that we do not paint an overly pro-Russian picture of the election. Our data show that it would be misleading: despite the election results and an existing narrative that Slovakia generally tends toward Russia, only about 18,5 % of Slovaks see Russia as a close partner, compared to 48 % for the EU.<sup>[56]</sup> Also, 32 % of the population wants *Ukraine*, not Russia (17 %), to win in the ongoing conflict.<sup>[57]</sup> In the context of the generally grim assessment of the Slovak election results, data like these add an important nuance.

## **Old vs New**

The final theme of the election cutting across the parties' narratives and permeating the first two themes is a divide between the old and the new, between more *conservative* and more *progressive* worldviews. **Conservative** voices were heard prominently during the election, especially – but not exclusively – from those parties and movements that emphasized stability, the past and took a negative stance toward helping Ukraine. Entities propagating these worldviews typically rejected and/or attacked such progressive-liberal topics such as LGBTI rights, feminism and gender politics or environmentalism, often portraying them as threats to traditional values and the national identity. This was the case of **SMER**. For instance, Juraj Blanár, now the Minister of Foreign Affairs, let it be known that the “threat to Slovakia is not just migration but also the goals of the progressivists”.<sup>[58]</sup> Similarly, MP Ján Podmánický, who once left SMER because he found it too left-leaning only to rejoin it in 2022, explained that “progressivism is exceptionally dangerous because it wants to use its ideological doctrines to destroy all the traditional institutions that for years helped our ancestors survive: family, nation, faith and even the nation state.”<sup>[59]</sup> **Republika** treaded similar lines, albeit in a fashion more attuned to the followers of Andrew Tate or Jordan Peterson – that is, younger males striving to achieve their ‘traditional’ social roles in an increasingly emasculated world (perhaps not incidentally, 60 % of those expecting to vote Republika were males, the highest ratio of all parties).<sup>[60]</sup> In their social media posts or online talk shows, well-groomed and muscular males would militate against the spread of “LGBTI agenda”, “multiculturalism” or “environmental activism”.<sup>[61]</sup> Racist undertones, especially against the Roma community but also immigrants, were not uncommon.<sup>[62]</sup>

But it was not just pro-Russian voices that campaigned on the conservative agenda. For instance, Milan Majerský, the leader of **KDH**, made a number of derogatory statements toward the LGBTI community. Causing an outrage, the politician said that “corruption and LGBTI are the ills of all countries, not just Slovakia [...] They are the plagues that simply corrupt any country [and] both may destroy a whole nation” (in the original, Majerský used the word “pliaga” that may also be translated as ‘vermin’).<sup>[63]</sup> Less radically, the former PM Matovič, representing a coalition of **OL’ANO** and two smaller parties said before the election that he wanted “no homosexual marriages, no LGBTXY in schools, no adoptions, propaganda, no transmen competing with women or children choosing their gender”.<sup>[64]</sup>

Following a pattern established in the first two themes, **PS** was again the only major party representing a contrasting view – in this context the *progressive* outlook. This should not surprise us, as such was said to be the way of the *future*: “a better future means equality, prosperity and human rights for ALL”.<sup>[65]</sup> In terms of LGBTI questions, the party supported a general broadening of rights. This included not only gay marriages – Slovakia at the moment allows *no* form of homosexual unions – but also the inclusion of sexual orientation as a legal basis for hate crime, something seen as necessary after the 2022 murderous attack in a Bratislava gay bar.<sup>[66]</sup> Similarly, they advocated the right to transition without having to undergo sterilization.<sup>[67]</sup> PS also campaigned on topics related to women’s rights. Boasting a gender-balanced candidate list, the party promised to tackle such issues as the male-female pay gap or domestic violence or to take a firm stance in support of interruptions, increasingly under attack of the more conservative politicians.<sup>[68]</sup> Finally, the party put a premium on environmental

topics: “in PS, the protection of the environment, combatting the climate crisis and the transition to a green economy are an integral component of our DNA. We have the strongest green programme and political team in Slovak politics.”<sup>[69]</sup> The only other party that somewhat followed in the progressive direction was **SaS**. For instance, the party supported registered partnerships for homosexuals or displayed a generally environment-friendly attitude.<sup>[70]</sup> However, compared to PS, SaS never went quite as far and did not put the ideas front and center (much of its discourse had to do with “economic growth”).<sup>[71]</sup>

In general, the conservative worldview was prevalent in the campaign. However, it was possibly overrepresented. Our data show that while the Slovak population tends to lean toward conservatism, about one third of Slovaks see themselves to be midway between liberal and conservative.<sup>[72]</sup>

### III-B. Visuals

The main themes and topics of the election were also reflected visually. While not a mirror image of the preceding one, this section overviews some of the most notable representations, showing how the parties sought to channel the messages and attitudes they said to stand for also optically, be it online or offline.

#### ***SMER: no helicopters, just men and women***

In a clever combination of their anti-war and conservative agenda, SMER put out a video showing a person visually resembling the PS leader Michal Šimečka, draped in the rainbow Pride flag and unable to decide which restroom to use: male, female, or something else? The something else in question was a helicopter, an allusion not only to the progressive belief that there are more than two genders but also the liberal party’s pledged support for Ukraine. While the Šimečka lookalike hesitates, Robert Fico appears and overshadows both the person and the helicopter door, leaving only male and female restrooms in clear sight and confirming that SMER sees only two genders and understands marriages as heterosexual unions.



(source: SMER's Facebook[\[73\]](#))

### ***Progressive Slovakia: the future is bright***

In more ways than one, the visual (*and* discursive) campaign of Progressive Slovakia bore resemblance to that of the Czech presidential candidate Danuše Nerudová in the country's 2023 election. With the close thematic affinity – both campaigns emphasized future as the main slogan – came also visual similarity: PS used bright blue colors to signify optimism and included a great deal of young people. At the same time, in the closing days of the campaign, the party organized concerts that drew scores of people to express their support – a move aptly utilized by another Czech presidential candidate, and the eventual winner, Petr Pavel. To demonstrate hope and the power of the many, PS used the visual spectacles on their social media, showcasing hopeful crowds full of (mostly) young people waving EU and Pride flags, stressing the party's Western, democratic and progressive orientations.



(source: Progressive Slovakia's Facebook[74])

### *Hlas: finding its voice*

The visual side of HLAS' campaign was not somewhat spectacular – its use of billboards, public rallies and social media were nothing out of the ordinary for a standard political campaign. If something, it resembled the way the campaigns were done 10 or 15 years ago – something that need not have been unintentional given some of the niche voters about 70 % of whom were likely to be older than 45.[75]

However, the visual side of the campaign is interesting for another reason. More than anything, it shows the difficulties the party faced whilst trying to set itself apart from the party it split from. Discursively, as we saw, this was somewhat possible, but the visual materials clearly showed that there were limits to what could be done. At the end of the day, the materials show that Hlas and SMER were the same people, with much the same program, going after similar voter groups.



(sources: Peter Pellegrini's Facebook[\[76\]](#), Robert Fico's Facebook[\[77\]](#))

### ***OL'ANO: the spectacle***

So far, the paper has not mentioned much the campaign of the former PM Matovič and the OL'ANO-led coalition of parties. This is not only due to its rather poor electoral results (8,8 %) but also because the coalition failed to put forward a coherent campaign thematic – expect for the spread of all-encompassing accusations that everyone except OL'ANO was either involved in corruption or willing to

cooperate with those involved. However, what deserves a mention is a stunt that Matovič pulled off during the end of the campaign: the mercurial former PM drove a car to an ongoing SMER rally and, using a megaphone, sought to disturb it by exclaiming accusations towards the party members. Whether intended or not, the stunt quickly turned into a spectacle as Matovič was physically assaulted by a number of SMER party members, most notably Robert Kaliňák, now the Minister of Defense. A video capturing the fight circulated both Slovak and international media and has since been remade into memes multiple times. While we should not attribute too much to this, the fact is that the coalition *did* cross the 7 % threshold after polling below it for months.



(Source: ČT 24<sup>[78]</sup>)

### III-C. Disinformation

To be complete, the analysis of the election has to deal with a dimension that has become an inexorable component of all modern-day elections: *disinformation*. To that end, this section begins by overviewing the existing disinformation landscape in Slovakia. Drawing on original CEDMO data, it paints a country highly susceptible to disinformation narratives and points out how disinformation was used by the political actors in the campaigns. Following that, it zooms in specifically on the question of Russian disinformation, highlighting prevalent attitudes, main narratives and key actors.

## ***The landscape***

While the spread of disinformation cannot be eradicated, its effectiveness hinges on how resilient a given target audience is to false narratives or not. In this respect, going into the 2023 election, Slovakia seemed rather vulnerable. As evident from our data, disinformation activity was rampant in the month preceding the election: more than 70 % of Slovaks reported being exposed to disinformation on social media at least once a week, about 60 % on websites and 55 % reported weekly exposure through chain emails.[\[79\]](#) An overwhelming majority of the population (75 %) also saw the spread of disinformation as a problem, with roughly the same number agreeing that it endangered Slovakia and almost 70 % thinking that the state should step in and curb the spread.[\[80\]](#) However, despite this degree of awareness, our research showed that many Slovaks nevertheless tended to fall victim to various false narratives. Using a number of ‘dummy’ disinformation narratives, we observed high proclivity especially with respect to disinformation related to the War in Ukraine and Ukrainians in Slovakia (60 % of respondents), the possibility of election fraud (ca. 50 %), and migration and its alleged threats (ca 40 %).[\[81\]](#) Similarly, our data demonstrated high degrees of conspirational thinking within the Slovak population – that is, the degree to which one is willing to trust in a conspiracy theory. For instance, 4 out of 10 Slovaks were inclined to believe that the big pharma industry actively spread diseases to boost its sales or that public authorities withheld from the public information about the harmful impact of vaccines.[\[82\]](#) Compounding the situation further, the population exhibited a high level of skepticism toward traditional media and a sense of being overwhelmed by an information overkill.[\[83\]](#)

Put together, these figures reveal a high degree of disinformation vulnerability. They help explain why false narratives were used excessively during the campaign not just for the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives (below) but also more generally as an increasingly standard tool of political campaigning. For instance, **Igor Matovič** regularly spread misleading information about most of his political opponents. In a series of posts, he either took photos out of context or used downright doctored photos to insinuate, among other things, that Progressive Slovakia would contemplate forming a coalition government with either SMER or Hlas.[\[84\]](#) PS, for its part, frequently sought to debunk such disinformation. Notably, the election also saw the deployment of **AI-assisted** disinformation. Two days before the election, a recording circulated the internet showing the PS leader Šimečka and Monika Tódová, a journalist with Denník N, allegedly concocting a plan to manipulate the election in the PS’ favor. Disinformation experts largely agreed that the recording had been generated with the help of AI but the spread of the recording was hard to contain.[\[85\]](#) It was even shared by one former MP who “had no doubts” that the recording was real.[\[86\]](#)

## ***Russian influence***

While only about a third of the Slovak population believes that the country is part of an ongoing information warfare perpetrated by Russia, the 2023 election – much as other recent elections in the region – showed that Russian disinformation continued to be a major aspect as a wide range of actors disseminated either Russian or pro-Russian narratives. We have already seen this in respect to the



political actors taking part in the election, notably SMER, Republika and SNS. However, it pays to zoom in on one particular SMER politician, the already mentioned **L'uboš Blaha**, who was ranked as the top pro-Russian source in Slovakia by Gerulata Technologies, a tech-based company combatting disinformation. According to Gerulata, Blaha, with his impact and influence, posed a “catastrophic” threat to Slovakia.<sup>[87]</sup> Among some of the false narratives the now-MP disseminated were such Russian constants as labeling Ukrainians “fascists” – tapping into past grievances, Blaha often exclaimed that “Slovaks will never forget how its east was plundered by the Bandera movement”.<sup>[88]</sup> He also peddled the narrative that, historically, “war and fasicsm always came from the West and freedom and peace from the East”.<sup>[89]</sup>

But it was not just politicians that spread Russian propaganda. Rather, the brunt was born by a number of social media pages, websites as well as chain emails. For instance, the Facebook page **Slobodný vysielateľ** (Free Broadcaster), ranked second in terms of dangerousness by Gerulata, provided an almost incessant stream of disinformation narratives ranging from overt Russian propaganda to conspiracy theories. The page also provided a platform for a number of well-known pro-Russian politicians, including Blaha, the SNS leader Andrej Danko, the ultranationalist Marián Kotleba or the Czech Communist MEP Kateřina Konečná. Another, obvious yet impactful social media page was the Facebook account of **Russian Embassy in Slovakia**. As would be expected, the account transmitted word-for-word Russian narratives – a fact that would not be worth mentioning were the account not followed by almost 70 thousand people. Compared to the Czech Republic, the **chain emails** did not seem plays as important a role, with 70 % of Slovaks claiming that they did not receive any such emails (only 56 % Czechs thought so).<sup>[90]</sup> However, their potential impact, though hard to gauge, should not be underestimated as it was via chain emails that, for example, the AI-generated recording would partially spread.<sup>[91]</sup>

#### **IV. The Aftermath: what came after**

With nearly 23 %, SMER became the winner of the election, leaving PS, their biggest competitor, trailing at 18, and Hlas at 14,7 %. Four other parties made it into the National Council – the OĽANO-led coalition (8,9 %), KDH (6,8 %), SaS (6,3 %) and SNS (5,6 %). What came as a surprise was that Republika, having polled at a stable 8-9 % eventually failed to pass the threshold. Still, the results clearly favored a government composed of SMER, Hlas and SNS – a combination nearly identical to Fico’s last government (2017-2019). That said, the results offered other options, including such that would make it possible to sidestep the winner and keep SMER outside of the government. The most frequently touted one was a coalition of PS, Hlas and either SaS or KDH. However, this did not come to be: despite being offered the position of Prime Minister – something indicative of how far the PS was willing to go to prevent another Fico government – Hlas showed little interest in so much as discussing the option.<sup>[92]</sup> Instead, after an abortive attempt to leverage the PM position from SMER, Pellegrini quickly fell in line, accepting the seat of the Council Speaker instead. With SNS on board, Fico was able to form his new government in fewer than two weeks, narrowly beating a tight deadline imposed on him by president Čaputová. It took equally little time before the government was sworn in. Retarding the process somewhat, the president used her constitutional right and refused to accept one minister nominee (Rudolf Huliak, an SNS candidate known for saying that he would ‘go to Moscow to beg for

forgiveness’).[\[93\]](#) However, the impasse was quickly resolved when the nominee was replaced and the government became official just 25 days after the election took place.

After an election revolving around issues like Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation, social values or the specter of the return of a mafia state, the country elected a government that would be fairly pro-Russian, nationalistic, conservative and inexorably linked to the ways of the past. The make up as well as the first steps of the government were revealing. For instance, in the first days, Fico doubled down on his Ukraine-related rhetoric and announced that the country would no longer supply arms to Ukraine (humanitarian aid would keep flowing, though).[\[94\]](#) Joining ranks with Hungary’s Orbán, he also announced at an EU Summit that Slovakia would oppose any further sanctions against Russia “unless we have analysis on their impact on Slovakia”.[\[95\]](#) On the domestic front, the situation seemed analogically somber. Robert Kaliňák, prosecuted in the past on charges of bribing the police or building an organized crime group (he was pardoned in both cases), became the Minister of Defense, raising concerns that he would use the position to cover up his past actions.[\[96\]](#) Even more tellingly, within hours after being sworn in, the new Minister of the Interior, Matúš Šutaj Eštok (Hlas), disbanded a group of criminal investigators led by Ján Čurila that had been tasked with the investigation of political corruption.[\[97\]](#) At the same time, Eštok fired the president of the police, Štefan Hamran, along with his two vice-presidents, ostensibly on the grounds of their inability to deal with the migration situation in the country and political bias.[\[98\]](#) It was under Hamran’s oversight that a number of people associated with SMER had been arrested during the past three years (Hamran himself wanted to resign in response to the new government). Fico made sure to let it be known that the actions did not amount to a “revenge”.[\[99\]](#)

With these developments, it seemed increasingly likely that Slovakia would, in the years to come, tilt progressively closer to Hungary, Russia, and its own past. That said, there were some silver linings. At the international level, despite all the posturing, there were already signs that Slovakia’s new stance vis-à-vis Ukraine would not be as firm. Reacting to Fico’s remarks, Pellegrini opined that halting arms deliveries to Ukraine would not apply to commercial shipments by Slovak arms manufacturers.[\[100\]](#) Domestically, the situation was grim but also slightly encouraging. With about one fifth of the electorate casting their votes for PS, it seems clear that there is a lot of young, Western-oriented people in Slovakia who want their country to move in the opposite direction than it, for now, seems bound for. What remains to be seen is how many there will be left in four years’ time.

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# Poland

## I. Background: the constitutional framework

By the nature of the Constitution adopted in 1997, Poland is "a democratic state ruled by law and implementing the principles of social justice".<sup>[101]</sup> De facto, its political system is parliamentary democracy, with a bicameral Parliament consisting of the Sejm (Lower House, 460 Deputies) and the Senate (Upper House, 100 Senators). When the two Houses have a common plenary session, it is called the National Assembly, and has largely ceremonial role, save for the impeachment of the President of the Republic under exceptional circumstances.<sup>[102]</sup> The **Sejm** is essentially the highest legislative instance in Poland, with the right to overrule decisions made by the Senate. Similar to other parliamentary democracies, the Sejm also exercises control over the executive branch of government, the Council of Ministers.<sup>[103]</sup> Members of both Houses are chosen at the same universal elections – no person may be a candidate for both – for the period of four years. However, the term of the office may be shortened by a resolution of the Sejm by a two-thirds majority vote or by a decree of the President of the Republic after consultation with speakers of the two chambers.<sup>[104]</sup>

Other major institutions that participate in the political system of Poland are the President of the Republic, the Council of Ministers, the Supreme Court, and the Constitutional Tribunal. Powers of the **President** are largely formal in nature. Chosen in a universal ballot for a five-year term, the president guarantees the “continuity of State authority”, represent the country in foreign affairs and acts as the “Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.”<sup>[105]</sup> Specifically, the President ratifies and renounces international treaties, appoints and recalls ambassadors, shortens the term of the Sejm, appoints judges of the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal, appoints and recalls commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, grants and renounces Polish citizenship, pardons convicts or issues awards. In matters of foreign affairs and defense, the President tightly cooperates with the Council of Ministers, and any presidential order (save for those provided in the art 144[3]) must be signed by the Prime Minister. However, a matter of great concern is the President’s inherent potential to impede or even paralyze the legislative process, as we explain further below.

According to the Constitution, the **Council of Ministers** conducts internal affairs and foreign policy.<sup>[106]</sup> Its rights and duties are all but same as in any parliamentary democracy, with some minor differences with regards to sub-state governance. The President nominates a Prime Minister, who in turn nominates Council members. The Prime Minister submits a program of activities to the Sejm together with the motion for a confidence vote. If a confidence vote does not pass an absolute majority, the procedure is repeated. The common practice is that the individual party or coalition with the most votes at the general elections is nominated by the President. Judges of the **Supreme Court** are nominated by the President based on recommendation from the National Council of the Judiciary. The President is also tasked with the nomination of the First President of the Supreme Court. Judges of the **Constitutional Tribunal** are nominated by the Sejm, serving single nine-year terms. The Polish judiciary has been the subject of the various Europe-wide criticisms because of the obvious political influence in its institutional design and decisions.<sup>[107]</sup>

As mentioned above, a major flaw of the Polish Constitutional provisions is the influence of the President on the legislative procedure. This, in fact, effectively turns the country into a semi-presidential system, especially in the conditions of cohabitation. Every bill effectively needs to pass three readings. [108] Unless the Constitution provides otherwise, each bill is adopted by a simple majority vote in the Sejm. The bill is then sent to the Senate for the second reading which may adopt it, send it back it for changes or reject it. The Sejm has the right to reject a resolution of the Senate by an absolute majority vote. The third reading is carried out by the President. The President has the right to sign the bill, ask the Constitutional Tribunal for an opinion on the alignment of the bill with the Constitution or to return the bill to the Sejm with a statement. Finally, the Sejm can re-pass the bill with a three-fifths majority vote. Beyond a doubt, none of the majorities in the Sejm in the foreseeable future will have a three-fifths majority. As a result, under the conditions of cohabitation, the legislative process may end in a deadlock, with the President returning any bill that is unfavourable to him or his political option. Another consequence of such increased presidential influence may be the necessity to form ad hoc coalitions to overcome legislative deadlock, making any parliamentary majority unstable and the political processes vulnerable. The incumbent president Duda, affiliated with the PiS party, has been accused of abusing his influence over legislation in 2017 and 2022, while also demonstrating that his prerogatives can be used in a de-escalatory manner under international pressure. [109] As will be seen later in the text many rightfully expected that after the 2023 general elections Duda would exercise his rights and try to slow down or even disrupt the legislative procedure. [110]

## **II. Background: the context and stakes**

The October 2023 general election took place at a time of harsh domestic socio-political polarization and murky prospects in international affairs. The War in Ukraine, the War in Gaza, the war in Nagorno Karabakh, illegal migration, looming Russian (hybrid) threat, omnipresent energy crisis, steep inflation, the inability of the EU to deliver effective policy solutions are just some of the recent developments that impacted Poland more than many other European countries. Due to its vicinity to Ukraine, Poland received a gigantic first wave of refugees which, despite the universal will to help, left significant long-term consequences on the political processes and the general population. Even the world leaders such as Joseph Biden visited Poland in the first weeks of the war to reassure the country that it was not the next victim of Russian imperialism and that the NATO's eastern flank was fully protected. [111] Nevertheless, the fear was there, amplified by the occasional border incident. [112] Planning for the elections, campaigning, and protecting democratic standards was not 'business as usual'.

On the domestic side of the coin, nationalist tendencies had been growing, instigating deep socio-political divide between progressive and regressive (or status quo) forces. Combined with the people in power, there existed a real threat of a tight governmental grip over state institutions. The personification of the desire to subordinate Poland to his rule is Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of the Law and Justice party (PiS) [113] and the brother of Lech Kaczynski, the former tragically deceased President of Poland. Analysts are unanimous that the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki is just a megaphone for Kaczynski. [114] There were even insider reports that Morawiecki often goes to the premises of Kaczynski to physically receive orders on what to do next in his position as the head of the

government[115]. The traditional political foe of PiS is the Civic Coalition (PO), led by the former Prime Minister and former head of the European Council, Donald Tusk.

The dangerous romance between the two parties began before the 2005 general elections when, in fact, they were expected to form a coalition government as the two centre-right options.[116] Their coalition would almost approach a super-majority of two-thirds which would allow them to make Constitutional reforms. However, the agreement could not be reached and PiS formed minority government with the support from right-wing populists and nationalists, the point at which their steer to the right began.[117] Elections in 2007 saw the tide turn, with the PO forming a government with an agrarian party, allowing Tusk to become Prime Minister. Nothing new save for the staggering fall of PiS was seen in 2011: Tusk continued to govern with the same coalition partner. The surprising reanimation of PiS happened in 2015 when they got enough votes to form the government alone. Putting Kaczynski formally aside seemed to be work like a charm.[118] A record turnout marked the election in 2019, with PiS retaining the absolute majority in the Sejm and losing the Senate to the opposition.

Once again, now in October 2023, the election was presented as the biggest struggle for Poland since the fall of Communism in 1989.[119] All political actors tried to mobilize an array of pockets of abstainers, pushing the divisive momentum to the edge. Before diving deeper into the major political parties participating in the election, opinion polls, as well as the very results, it is useful to point out certain peculiarities of the Polish electoral system. Some of them are relevant to this very electoral cycle, while others are general remarks.

**High threshold.** The political scene in Poland has been a very inert one, with party rivalries easily growing into multi-cycle struggles. This is due to a relatively high threshold to enter the Sejm and the Senate. The threshold for individual parties is 5 %, while for coalitions it is 8. The pros and cons of such an approach are obvious. An advantage is the virtually non-existent blackmail potential of small parties. But the drawback is that in every election a huge number of votes will be irrelevant. For example, in 2019, more than 18 % of votes went to actors who did not reach the threshold. Even the method for allocating seats in the Sejm was adjusted to favour large parties.[120] However, radical swings in support for a particular party are not uncommon, as can be seen in the already mentioned opposition-absolute majority transformation of PiS.

**Rarity of early elections.** The modern political history of Poland proves that the coalition governments are stable, but also that majority governments do not tend to provoke unnecessary confidence votes. This is significant when it comes to power projection and mid- to long-term plans regarding socio-political reforms. The tendency to avoid early elections at any cost was an additional reason for opposition to mobilize voters in 2023 because another PiS government had been represented as the one which will introduce authoritarian rule in many areas, from the media to the judiciary.

**Referendum issue.** The Morawiecki government tried to aggravate the importance of the elections by calling a referendum for the very same date, October 15. There were four questions, from which the most important was about immigration: “Do you support the admission of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the forced relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?”.[121] The initiative largely failed

due to the referendum not reaching the required 50 percent +1 majority for it to be considered legitimate<sup>[122]</sup>.

The largest political actors that would end up above the threshold were five. The incumbent **PiS**, trying to protect and reinforce its grip over the democratic institutions and processes, acting under the direct leadership of Jaroslaw Kaczynski. The biggest opposition actor was **Civic Alliance**, a centre-right initiative led by Donald Tusk, tasked with bringing PiS down from power and ensuring a relatively smooth transition towards a period of reforms. The **Left** is a center-left, catch-all alliance, proud of its progressive politics, such as support for LGBT and secular standpoints. They hoped to be able to make a meaningful contribution to a government replacing PiS. **Third Way** is an ad-hoc alliance formed by an agrarian and a Christian democratic party, bringing a voting option for those who did not want to support the two major blocs. Many analysts suggested that the potential of this coalition to reach the threshold would play a decisive role in the government formation.<sup>[123]</sup> Finally, **Confederation** is a far-right coalition, running as the only subject that would potentially collaborate with PiS, despite the two having opposite visions of economic policy.

When analysing numerous opinion polls prior to the general election of 15th October, the precision with which the dynamic between the two major parties was predicted is staggering. In fact, all of the major polls situated PiS at 32-36 percent and KO at 26-30.<sup>[124]</sup> It is equally telling that the polls framed the public discussions around the question of whether the Third Way would pass the threshold, situating it around the necessary 8 percent. Only one poll before the election day suggested that they might jump higher than 10 percent.<sup>[125]</sup> The polls tended to overestimate The Left and Confederation, as the votes from the two extremes of the electoral offer obviously went either to the centre or to those lists that did not pass the threshold. Exit polls were quite accurate and reliable.<sup>[126]</sup> The margin of error was at the maximum level of 1,5 percent, again in relation to the surprise results of the Third Way on the one hand side and the relatively bad results of the Left and Confederation on the other.

In a major predictive analysis prior to the elections, Baranowski and Prochwicz-Jazowska presented four possible scenarios for the formation of the government, together with their probability and the resulting potential for long-term stability.<sup>[127]</sup> The first scenario was the most conservative of them all, with PiS and Confederation in power, the two parties that, aside from economic views, would easily find common grounds to push Poland even more to the right. The second likely option was a liberal-centrist government of KO, the Left, and the Third Way. This arrangement would loosen the authoritarian grip and push for reforms while struggling to keep the coalition together over crucial legislative solutions. Third option, considered unlikely, was that PiS would retain a majority government. It goes without saying that the influence of PiS on state institution would become ubiquitous and the government would have all the tools at its to diminish the chances of success in further elections. However, exit polls clearly indicated that this was an almost unattainable milestone for PiS. The last scenario was the government of KO and Confederation. Despite being the coalition of the unwilling of ideologically opposite actors, it was seen as a possible outcome for a government that would have the task of preparing a better environment for the next electoral cycle.

### III. Analysis of the election

#### III-A. Discourses

The campaign in Poland was marked by harsh rhetoric that further polarized the socio-political environment. Six narratives were particularly present, and all the significant actors utilized them to build confidence within certain pockets of voters.

##### *Migrants*

Unexpectedly, over the course of campaign, the issue of migrations became a battleground for political parties. This security issue par excellence was armed with a political charge. One could easily argue that the campaign was a competition of who would demonstrate the ability to find justification for anti-immigrant sentiments. As an analysis states: “PiS viewed the scheme as part of a wider clash of cultures, arguing that its political and symbolic importance went well beyond the numbers involved and that it threatened the country’s sovereignty, national identity and security”.<sup>[128]</sup> Morawiecki sparked international outrage when he said that violent protests in France were due to uncontrolled immigration.<sup>[129]</sup> KO backed the EU’s handling of immigration affairs, with Tusk saying that he would “allow even more people to come from countries like Saudi Arabia, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan”.<sup>[130]</sup> Their advertisements often showed various footage of violence and criminal acts done by illegal immigrants, for the sake of demonstrating that PiS wanted to scare Poles by the problem they caused.<sup>[131]</sup> A video appeared of PiS diplomats selling visas to immigrants despite maintaining a harsh anti-immigrant stance.<sup>[132]</sup> The Third Way was very moderate when it came to immigration. One of their leaders, Holownia, stated that security cannot exclude humanity.<sup>[133]</sup> The Left’s Zandberg claimed that tackling right-wing attitudes on migrants “is like wrestling with a pig in the mud”.<sup>[134]</sup> The elections outcome is set to significantly soften Poland’s immigration, albeit without adopting the open-door policy similar to that of Germany or France.

##### *Minorities*

If the designated LGBT zones became a symbol of authoritarian rule of PiS, then the easier part of the job for the opposition was to utilize this to their own benefit. Confederation was the most vocal on minorities issue. Their campaign moto was a five-point platform of refusal of Jews, homosexuals, abortions, taxes, and the EU. Tumanovicz said that if they come to power, they would “register not only [homosexual] relationships but also individual faggots [pedały] so that none of them has the right to raise a child, be a schoolteacher, or even come close to any child”.<sup>[135]</sup> PiS was no more tolerant in accusing the opposition of plotting to turn Poland into an irreligious, gay-friendly dystopia.<sup>[136]</sup> Kaczynski often reiterated traditional family values as the bedrock of the PiS government, appealing to a very specific audience. At one rally, he ranted: “The whole social mechanism of preparing a young

person, first a child and then a youth, for future roles as a woman and a man, for starting a family, for the role of a mother and a father, is being called into question".<sup>[137]</sup> Predictably, KO mobilized progressive voters by promising that one of the first moves of their government would be to draft a legal bill to introduce same-sex civil partnerships.<sup>[138]</sup> This caused controversy even within the KO ranks. Leaders of The Left warned that minorities should not be objectified and oppressed because of the election campaign.<sup>[139]</sup>

### ***Relations with Ukraine***

Narratives about the Russian invasion of Ukraine were omnipresent, especially in the countries close to the conflict. Poland is no exception to the rule. Despite the undivided support for Ukraine during the conflict, a certain feeling of fatigue in public contributed to cooling down and harsh rhetorical exchanges. President Duda was exceptionally rough: "Ukraine is behaving like a drowning person clinging to everything he can. A drowning person is extremely dangerous; he can pull you down to the depths ... simply drown the rescuer".<sup>[140]</sup> Morawiecki demonstrated the change in narrative from support for Ukraine to the defense of Poland from any future Russian attack. The polarizing issue of arms and technology transfer to Ukraine was clearly addressed: "We are no longer transferring any weapons to Ukraine because we are now arming ourselves with the most modern weapons"<sup>[141]</sup>. The biggest problem in relations with Ukraine arose over grain when Poland and Hungary decided to bypass the EU and introduce a ban on import of certain food products from Ukraine. The prime minister said like a true populist: "Of course we respect all of their problems, but for us, the interests of our farmers are the most important thing".<sup>[142]</sup> Tusk thought that the escalation prior to the general election was very timely for the PiS government and that they were ready to sacrifice all the efforts to help Ukraine in the struggle against Russia for the sake of their own profit.<sup>[143]</sup> The Left and the Third Way showed unconditional support for Ukraine, using emotionally charged language of "brothers and sisters" and "warm and open hearts".<sup>[144]</sup> The Left even suggested that, aside from providing massive direct financial aid and participation in all EU programs, Ukraine should not be considered indebted to anyone in the future<sup>[145]</sup>.

### ***Energy security***

With energy issues ubiquitous after the summer, one of the hottest narratives in Poland was dependence on Russian gas. Morawiecki explained, somewhat rationally, that Russian gas is much more than just an energy issue: "After Moscow's gas blackmail of Poland and Ukraine, after the attack on Georgia, after the annexation of Crimea, we knew that a hydrocarbon monopoly in Europe was as important to Putin as tanks and ammunition".<sup>[146]</sup> Promises to diminish the dependence on Russian gas were flying around, always followed by a set of innovative solution looking more like a bucket list than a reality-based consideration.<sup>[147]</sup> Civic Platform saw an opportunity to shift energy mix towards wind and solar; the Third Way wanted to decentralize energy sector by offering every home a possibility to generate its own energy; The Left stressed the importance of renewables. PiS, all the while, proposed an institutional solution of creating a new Ministry of Energy Transition, tasked exclusively with finding alternative energy sources.<sup>[148]</sup> Easier said than done, the energy security narrative did



not play a decisive role in the October elections but showed that political actors can unite around a certain issue and work together to find appropriate solutions.

### ***Relations with the European Union***

Similar to the previous issues, PiS leaders were very vocal in proclaiming anti-mainstream views in order to solidify their presence within certain socio-political bubbles while trying to gain support from others. The EU and the Polish government had a hard time due to violations of the rule of law, the politicization of the judiciary, media monopolization, to mention but a few areas of conflict. Naturally, the response of the Polish leadership to the critique from Brussels was rough. Morawiecki stated that he supported enlargement, but not federalization, because further limitation of state sovereignty could lead to “European nations repeating mistakes from the past”.<sup>[149]</sup> He also warned that attempts to tame the European nations with the whip of values would lead to self-destruction, adding that everyone is fed-up with European bureaucracy.<sup>[150]</sup> As the former President of European Council and an avowed Euro-federalist, Tusk holds exactly the opposite attitudes. In a speech at the European Commission, Tusk said: “I am here (today) at the headquarters of the European Commission to speed up the process of returning back to the European stage. We are fully convinced that this is the will of Polish voters.”<sup>[151]</sup> He promised to unlock the multibillion post-Covid recovery funds that had been made unavailable to Poland due to human rights concerns. Third Way’s Holownia saw the elections as a potential path to renovate the European Union, while Confederation’s Mentzen said that the EU was a totalitarian state<sup>[152]</sup>.

### ***Negative and aggressive campaign***

Although not a classic narrative, the election campaign in Poland was characterized as a particularly violent and aggressive one. Political actors did not hesitate to go beyond the limits of good taste and used various methods to discredit their opponents.<sup>[153]</sup> The best example of this is the PiS campaign’s effort to frame Tusk as a German agent working directly against Polish interests. Climate minister Ozdoba tweeted after Poland beat Germany in a football match: “Poland–Tusk 1-0”<sup>[154]</sup>. The widespread anger did not stop the government from continuing the propaganda by taking certain sentences from Tusk’s speeches out of context and misrepresenting them over and over on state media.<sup>[155]</sup> They indicated that Tusk’s victory would mean that Poland would be drawn into the German sphere of influence. On the other hand, Tusk adopted a similar rhetoric, accusing the government of brainwashing the population, ‘just as the Nazis and Communists did in the past’.<sup>[156]</sup> In fact, all opposition parties talked about the current state of affairs in terms of endemic corruption, a captive state, a creeping dictatorship, etc.<sup>[157]</sup> Televised debates were occasions when candidates used exceptionally foul language and unanimously played the trump card of aggressive behavior. An interesting exchange took place when Morawiecki accused Tusk of intending to sell Poland’s forests, seas, and mountains, while Tusk responded by suggesting that someone had put drugs in the Prime Minister’s glass of water.<sup>[158]</sup>

### III-B. Visuals

Arguably the least dynamic or provocative aspect of the 2023 elections in Poland was visual. Throughout the campaigns, the political actors largely failed to deliver anything other than imitations of old clichés. The vast majority of the materials focused either on charismatic leaders or negative campaign. **PiS**, as expected, offered an appropriate mix of the two, with Kaczynski and Morawiecki at the centre of the stage. Rallies were flooded by Polish flags; the rhetoric was inflammatory, aimed at framing the elections as the ultimate battle for Polish independence. Tusk was a prominent target of PiS campaign materials. In picture 2, a billboard reads that ‘voters cannot give Tusk another chance to enslave the country’.



(Picture 1[159])



(Picture 2[160])

**KO** and Donald Tusk turned their campaign into a classic white collar opposition campaign, trying to bridge the gap between his party and the population by engaging with the masses while being decorated with big red hearts. Aside from prioritizing the pro-EU narrative, Tusk deployed a harsh negative campaign against the incumbent leadership based on allegations of corruption, authoritarianism, and even treason. An interesting feature of this campaign was been the so-called ‘Tuskobus’, which was used to travel around the country and getting closer to the people, especially in smaller rural places.



(Picture 3[161])



(Picture 4[162])

The **Third Way**, as the name suggests, sought to promote an alternative to the two major actors. They fostered unity of their leadership, a green agenda, and a revival of agrarian ideas. Their appearance

can be described as casual, often without the conspicuous black suits and white shirts. Humble rallies and an efficient political platform obviously provided them a good foundation for the surprising election results. On the far-right spectrum, **Confederation** attracted attention by its foul language, promotion of traditional family values, and demonization of political opponents. In picture 6, we can see Confederation leaders labeling their political motto as ‘a struggle against the gang of four’, which is obviously an allusion to their largest political opponents.



(Picture 5[163])



(Picture 6[164])

### III-C. Disinformation

According to our CEDMO data collected before to elections, more than half of Polish citizens believed that there would be foreign interference in future elections.[\[165\]](#) The background to this is clear: the backsliding of institutions and the undermining of democratic processes. Most people who believe in third-party influence are PiS voters[\[166\]](#). Moreover, within this bubble, more than 90 % of the respondents were convinced that Russia would try to influence the Polish elections, which again is in line with the general anti-Russian sentiment in the country, related to the aggression in Ukraine and beyond.[\[167\]](#) The same data shows that Poles are quite confident in their ability to recognize disinformation, especially regarding the war in Ukraine and prominent conspiracy theories.[\[168\]](#) Despite the demonstrated certainty, Poles still believe that their country is part of the Russian sphere of influence and that an information war is an inevitability.[\[169\]](#)

When it comes to concrete disinformation efforts, the Polish environment can be considered as a particularly interesting one because of the peculiarities of the media landscape, but also because of the almost universal will of political actors to resort to disinformation tools. When the state-controlled refinery PKN-Orlen bought Polska Press a few months ago, it was obvious that the Polish government wanted to tighten the control over the media during the election campaign.[\[170\]](#) A consequence of such a development is the possibility to craft and disseminate disinformation to the widest audience without being held accountable. While disinformation through this channel is a state-funded activity, the burden of debunking usually falls on independent fact-checkers and private organizations.[\[171\]](#) The response from public institutions such as the Polish Internal Security Agency (ABW) and the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT) was sparse and reactive, with a 'high point' being the arbitrary deportation of foreign agents of influence working in Poland.[\[172\]](#) One notable exception was a Facebook ban on Confederation due for spreading COVID disinformation.[\[173\]](#) The ban was lifted the month before the general election.[\[174\]](#)

The abuse of the public broadcaster was best evident in repeated attacks on the opposition leader Donald Tusk. As an analyst in the New York Times wrote: "For weeks now, state television has peppered news broadcasts with a recording of two single words — "für Deutschland" or "for Germany" — uttered by Mr. Tusk during a 2021 speech in German that thanked Germany's Christian Democratic Union party for its role in healing Europe's divisions at the end of the Cold War".[\[175\]](#) This fabrication was used to generate a narrative that Mr. Tusk was working for German interests. Certainly, being denunciatory and offensive, the government did not avoid building whole stories upon these two words. One of the PiS advertisements openly stated that Tusk had received orders from the German Chancellor in his previous tenure as the Prime Minister, ending with Mr. Kaczynski saying that "Mr. Tusk is not here anymore and the old customs are gone"[\[176\]](#).

The narrative that the opposition parties wanted to sell Poland to Germany and other foreign powers had grown into a considerably robust one. In one of the videos broadcast by PiS, Minister of Defense Blaszczak accused Tusk and his party of treason and published declassified top secret military strategy from the times when Tusk was Prime Minister, explaining the course of events under the condition of Russian invasion. The following statement was made: "The plan for the use of the armed forces,

approved by the then head of the Defense Ministry Klich, stipulated that the country's independent defense would last a maximum of two weeks, and in seven days the enemy would reach the right bank of the Vistula. The documents clearly show that Lublin, Rzeszów, and Łomża could have been a Polish Bucha".<sup>[177]</sup> Despite the damage being done, the author of the document himself said that the content was taken out of the context: "Even from this part of this one paragraph, such a conclusion cannot be drawn, and the opposite conclusion can be drawn from the entire document".<sup>[178]</sup> While common sense leads to the conclusion that no one has the right or ability to voluntarily sell or give up a part of the territory, the ultimate aim of disinformation is to increase socio-political polarization and spread fear among the population, which often does not have sufficient amount of resilience to these efforts.

That the other side of the political spectrum is not immune to utilization of disinformation for the political gains was demonstrated by the AI-generated speech of Mr. Morawiecki. KO launched a video in which an inappropriate mix of real speech and an AI-generated one could be heard. At a time when allegedly leaked emails of the Chief of Staff of Morawiecki indicated that there exist inner tensions in the governing party, the opposition took the opportunity to fabricate the voice of Morawiecki reading some of those emails<sup>[179]</sup>. This deepfake immediately sparked resistance even at the international level and KO acknowledged that some parts of the video were AI-generated.

#### **IV. The Aftermath**

Voter turnout was just over 74 percent, breaking the record since the fall of Communism. The mobilization of voters proves the importance of the election. The results were unanimously interpreted as an example of how to fight against populism and hegemonistic tendencies.<sup>[180]</sup> PiS emerged as the strongest actor with 35,6%, while KO got 30,7. Looking at these two figures, it became obvious that no majority government could be formed. Third Way hit the jackpot with 14,4 % and acquired the potential to swing the government formation to one side or even preclude any government from being formed. Nevertheless, they immediately rejected any possibility of coalition talks with PiS.<sup>[181]</sup> The Left barely passed the threshold with 8,61 %, saving the day for the opposition. If Confederation had been an alliance as prior to 2019, they would not have entered the Sejm or the Senate; but in the current form of the political party, it received 7,16 %, enough to fulfill the threshold for parties. The number of seats clearly indicated that the most likely option for the future government was the liberal-centrist coalition of KO, the Third Way and the Left.

Indeed, the odds were on the side of Donald Tusk and his potential allies. However, mathematics and the political reality of Poland are two quite different worlds. President Duda, together with the incumbent government, in a predictable move, decided to prolong the transition of power to its constitutional limits. Strictly following the tradition of offering the mandate to the party or coalition that individually won the most votes, Duda proclaimed that he believed in Morawiecki's capacity to form a new government.<sup>[182]</sup> This action gave PiS more than a month to tie up the loose ends of their government, but also to solidify its institutional presence. Some of the pragmatic reasons for delaying the transition were to renew contracts of public servants so that their dismissal would be much harder for the new government, to get rid of incriminating documents, to set up traps for the future incumbent, and to boost the myth of stolen elections through the state-controlled media outlets.<sup>[183]</sup> Even Morawiecki himself argued that the chances to establish parliamentary majority were almost non-existent. However, he

went so far as to propose the Third Way an arrangement in which they would have the Prime Minister position and Morawiecki would accept to be 'just' a minister. This offer was politely turned down by the leaders of the Third way. None of this was an obstacle for the majority vote to happen in the Sejm. After the crushing defeat of Morawiecki, Duda was forced to give mandate to the KO, and the government of Donald Tusk was voted in on December 11, almost two months after the elections. Without a doubt, Poland entered an era of political instability, both domestically and internationally. At home, it will be marked by a tortuous grip on the institutions resulting from the years of PiS governments, but also by de facto inflated malign influence of president Duda on the legislative procedure. Abroad, Tusk will have the very hard task of normalizing the relations with Ukraine and the EU, particularly Germany, while trying to make good on the trust of Polish citizens and an almost universal European support he received during the campaign.

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## Conclusion and final remarks

Slovakia and Poland have shared many, more or less fortunate, developments throughout the history, but they have evolved into two largely different modern political systems. That said, international and domestic dynamics have brought the two closer together. This analysis demonstrated that parliamentary elections held under external turmoil and internal ideological arch rivalry can produce similar results. The titular foray into the the past bears witness to the almost paradoxical voter instinct that change is good, even it means repeating the causes of past mistakes. Among many arguments to back the claim, we wish to highlight six.

First, both elections were essentially contests between two major leaders. Furthermore, those leaders serve as the personifications of either the party behind them or an ideological framework. In Slovakia, Fico and Šimečka dominated the scene, and aside from Pellegrini as a clincher, they were involved in the majority of big debates, but also disinformation efforts. While we can say that Fico is a charismatic leader, Šimečka predominantly identified himself with the progressive, liberal ideology. Kaczyński and Tusk barely allowed anyone to penetrate their permanent cycle of mutual accusations, denunciations, and political traps. They even held televised debates without the presence of other candidates. Without a real third party to fight for their potential support, the two main candidates adopted the strategy of combating each other.

Second, Slovakia and Poland showed a lack of societal resilience and became fertile playgrounds for various foreign influence operations. The environments were highly conducive to disinformation campaigns, the spread of fake news, and the erosion of democratic processes. The missing links for a more effective response were strategic communication, better institutional integration, an increased media literacy. Throughout the analysis, we identified and explained numerous cases of Russian and pro-Russian disinformation that led to a strong sense of third-party meddling in the election affairs. In Slovakia, the narrative was so weaponized that the voter's choice reduced to: 'are you for or against Russia?'. In Poland, PiS attempted to do the same thing with the Tusk-Germany nexus, but ultimately

failed. It is also telling that in both countries we found the use of cutting-edge technologies to spread disinformation (AI-generated deepfakes).

If populism is a floating signifier, increasingly deprived of any analytical value, we can still claim that right-wing populism was used as an electoral strategy in Slovakia and Poland. Using different tools and with varying degrees of success, SMER and PiS confirmed themselves as the champions of populist tendencies. Both parties played the trump cards of increasing social polarisation, introducing anti-mainstream narratives, demonizing political opponents, etc. This can only be done by catch-all parties that consistently push the political centre to the right. In this way, they can be sure to fire the cannon without risking compromising their own positions. SMER wisely took advantage of the widespread doubts about democracy in Slovakia and managed to turn the debate into a choosing between the lesser of two evils. PiS had a much harder task to justify the ever-increasing grip on state institutions – a task it failed at.

It seems that international relations have never played such an important role in parliamentary elections. Obviously, the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the subsequent (cessation of the) support for the Ukrainian war effort was at the center. No less significant were relations with the EU, NATO, and the debate on European strategic autonomy from the United States. Despite being on the verge of political nonsense, foreign policy was as important as domestic in these two elections. Fico promised to cut off arms supplies to Ukraine, Kaczynski and Morawiecki said the same. The other side of the political spectrum tried to convince the population that there was no Ukraine fatigue and that the support would be unconditional. Having a romance with pro-Russian discourse seems to have attracted a few more voters than usually.

Fifth, the Presidents in both countries participate in the decision-making when it comes to government formation. In Poland, it is based on the constitutional design, where the President can significantly impede the formation and legislative process. The question of good political will is whether he will use it to the extreme or seek moderation. Having in mind the polarized environment, the former appears to be the more viable option. In Slovakia, the President has much fewer rights. However, an interesting moment was the para-constitutional interference of President Čaputová in the government formation, when she formally required a personnel change.

Sixth, no political actor in either country strived towards status quo ante. Whether the tendency was to consolidate the already existing influence or revise the established order, everyone opted for change. Indeed, changes did occur, as our title seeks to suggest. Slovakia chose to enter extremely turbulent times of a government that might sooner or later demonstrate authoritarianism. Poland (at the time of writing the paper, not yet officially) ousted the strongman, but paved the way for a potentially unstable and (externally induced) inefficient government. Only time will help us see the true nature of the two changes.



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