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**Foreign policy – a new field of populist politics. Case study
of the “Eastern policy” of Slovakia after the 2023 national
elections**

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of a populist style of governance on the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic following the 2023 parliamentary elections. In addition to changes at the discursive level, the article examines changes in political decision-making processes, changes at the institutional level, and changes in the substance of foreign policy. The article focuses on the policies of the Smer – Social Democracy (Smer-SD) party, which holds the decisive say in foreign policy. It focuses primarily on one aspect of this policy—the policy toward Russia and Ukraine—which is characterized by the greatest discontinuity compared to the period before 2023, and in which the influence of populism and de-Europeanization is most pronounced. In the concluding section, the author examines the opportunities and limitations of populist foreign policy within the context of existing domestic and external factors shaping Slovakia’s political development.

Keywords: Slovakia; Smer-SD; populist foreign policy; Russia’s aggression against Ukraine; de-Europeanization

Introduction

Following the early parliamentary elections in 2023, a new gov-

erning coalition was formed in Slovakia, consisting of the parties Smer – Social Democracy (Smer-SD), Hlas – Social Democracy (Hlas-SD), and the Slovak National Party (SNS). As in 2020, this represented a substantial change in the ruling coalition, as no party from the previous coalition is represented in the current one. While the 2020 parliamentary elections focused primarily on the fight against corruption, three years later, the elections were dominated by issues of stability and calls to overcome political chaos. However, following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, foreign policy issues also came to the forefront, with the Smer-SD and SNS parties in particular raising the issue of Slovakia's sovereignty in foreign policy. In doing so, they criticized the policies of the previous governments led by Eduard Heger (2021–2023) and Ľudovít Ódor (2023), as well as those of the then-President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová (2019–2024), for providing support to Ukraine, including military aid.

Concerns about an escalation of the armed conflict are also reflected in the motto of the policy statement of Robert Fico's fourth government: "A Better, Calmer, and Safer Life." The government document also speaks of the need to "restore sovereignty to Slovak foreign policy and protect Slovak interests," thereby indirectly suggesting that previous governments had failed to pursue a sovereign foreign policy. The protection of Slovak interests was also to become a key principle in Slovakia's activities within the European Union (EU). It defined as a priority the fight against efforts to abolish the right of veto on issues requiring the unanimous consent of all member states and against the "unjustified transfer of powers from member states to EU institutions".

The government committed to "continue supporting humani-

tarian aid to Ukraine," but not to "continue providing military aid to Ukraine at the government level." Alongside slogans such as "Slovakia First" and "sovereign foreign policy," the call for a "foreign policy toward all four corners of the world" in the context of membership in the European Union and NATO has also become part of the government's agenda. The Slovak government's policy statement also warns against attempts to "erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East."¹ The stress on the claim of sovereignty is part of the populist rhetoric pursued by Smer-SD and its allies both before and after the elections.

"Eastern Policy"—currently understood as the Slovak Republic's stance toward Ukraine and the Russian Federation in the context of the ongoing military conflict—has thus become one of the most significant elements of discontinuity in Slovakia's foreign policy after 2023. The aim of this chapter is to analyze Slovakia's current "Eastern Policy" and the extent to which it differs from EU policy. At the same time, the chapter will analyze the evolution of Smer's foreign policy after 2020 and the limits of these changes.

Since its founding in 1999, Smer has been characterized as a populist party. In its early years, it was described as a "centrist populist" party.² Although later, after 2003, the party began to identify with European social democratic parties and in 2004 even became a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Socialist International, it retained numerous populist elements in its agenda, while its relations with the PES remained complicated. From 2006 to 2008, the party's member-

¹ *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie život.* Bratislava: Office of Government of the Slovak Republic, 2023, https://www.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1694/programove_vyhlasenie_vlady_sr.pdf.

² Peter Učeň, "Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe". *SAIS Review*, vol. XXVII, no. 1 (Winter – Spring 2007), pp. 49–62.

ship was suspended after it formed a coalition with the far-right SNS. A more pronounced shift toward populism in Smer-SD's agenda occurred in connection with the 2015 refugee crisis and the rise in electoral support for far-right parties, which led to the far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽS NS) entering parliament following the 2016 national elections and to Robert Fico's forced resignation as prime minister in 2018 as a result of the anti-corruption protests "For a Decent Slovakia" following the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Given these developments in the party's agenda, there is consensus within the academic community on characterizing Smer-SD as a populist force³. According to the 'Authoritarian Populism Index', this party is using nationalist rhetoric ... it has described Slovakia as a nation for Slovaks, not for its minorities." The party is characterized as rooted in Slovak social democracy, combined with its nationalism, and is classified as both a left-wing populist and a national conservative party: "It is left-leaning on economic issues, conservative on social issues, and has become Eurosceptic in recent years, with Fico being a close ally of Hungary in Brussels."⁴

The issue of foreign policy orientation—and, above all, relations with Russia—was a contentious topic in Slovak politics as early as the first years of Slovakia's existence as an independent state. It was viewed as such during the third government of Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998), when Mečiar's government was building a special relationship with the Russian Federation in response

to the crisis in relations with the EU and NATO⁵. A foreign policy consensus was not established until after this period, when all major parliamentary political parties expressed support for Slovakia's integration into the European Union. Even then, this process was not straightforward, particularly during the so-called Kosovo Crisis in 1999, when a large segment of society objected to the Slovak government's decision to allow NATO air forces—which were attacking the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—to fly over the country's territory. Although differing approaches to relations with the Russian Federation also emerged in subsequent years (e.g., during the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 or during the suspension of natural gas supplies to Central Europe via Ukraine in early 2009), one can speak of a persistent foreign policy consensus among Slovakia's political elites until 2014. Russia's occupation and annexation of Crimea following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2014 and the outbreak of armed conflicts in eastern Ukraine thus also mark the beginning of the erosion of the foreign policy consensus that had prevailed until then.

In analyzing Slovakia's foreign policy after 2023, I will focus primarily on the activities of Smer-SD, as this party holds a dominant position not only within the governing coalition but also in foreign policy. This applies not only to the definition of its goals and specific measures but also to its performance, since during the party's terms in government, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (until 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic) was led by the party's appointees—Ján Kubiš (2006–2009), Miroslav Lajčák (2009–2010, 2012–2020), and Juraj Blanár (from 2023

³ See Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, "Euroscepticism and Anti-Establishment Parties in Europe," *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 46, no. 8, pp. 1171–1191. doi:10.1080/07036337.2024.2329634. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2329634>; Augustus Giller "SMER, Anti-Western Populism, and Political Violence in Post-Communist Slovakia," *Bates College Journal of Political Studies*: Vol. 1: No. 1 (2025), pp. 32–56.

⁴ Andreas Johansson Heinö, *Authoritarian Populism Index*. Stockholm: Timbro 2024, p. 270. <https://www.epicenternetwork.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Populism-Index-2024-Compressed.pdf>

⁵ Alexander Duleba, *The Blind Pragmatism of Slovak Eastern Policy: the actual agenda of Slovak-Russian Bilateral Relations*, Bratislava: RC SFPA (1996); Pavol Lukáč, Vladimír Bilčík, Grigorij Mesežnikov, and Olga Gyárfášová, *Kosovo 1999 a slovenská spoločnosť*. Bratislava: iRC SFPA (2001).

to the present). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy, while certain key issues were communicated by the prime minister himself. The Smer-SD party in Slovakia was the dominant component of the governing coalition 2006–2010, 2016–2020, and from 2023 to the present; from 2012–2016, it held a majority in the National Council of the Slovak Republic and governed independently.

How to understand the populist foreign policy?

The concept of so-called “populist foreign policy”—that is, the impact of a populist style of governance on the nature of a given state’s foreign policy—remains a largely under-researched topic, in contrast to the effects of populism in domestic politics. It is precisely the “success of populist leaderships in winning governmental power ... and setting and shaping the political agenda” that has caused populism to “become a defining feature of the domestic *and* international political landscape”⁶, despite numerous differences at the national and regional levels⁷. As Wajner and Giurlando further point out, “even in countries where populists took power, few scholars considered the role of populism in their interactions with other international actors and their international stances to be particularly puzzling”⁸.

Populism is ideologically articulated as a thin-centered ideology, “one that considers society to be ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite.’” It interprets its politics as an expression of the “*volonté générale*”⁹. In relation to foreign policy, it

is relevant to emphasize populism’s questioning of “all kinds of technocratic authorities that fail to reflect the *vox populi*,” including regional and international organizations, international non-governmental organizations, multinational companies, and the international judicial system¹⁰. In the case of EU member states, this most often refers to so-called “Brussels,” although it may not directly involve questioning a country’s EU membership, but rather distancing oneself from its institutions, “bureaucracy,” or representatives of the most powerful EU member states.

The focus on the leader as an ideological chameleon—adapting his ideology and platform to prevailing social sentiments or to potential partners¹¹—means that decision-making is becoming more unpredictable and is based on personal loyalty when filling key positions, rather than on experience, competence, and pedigree¹². Another core feature of populism is anti-pluralism, manifested in a tendency toward homogenization and an exclusionary conception of the people. This gives rise to a negative attitude toward minorities¹³, which can also manifest itself in various ways in the realm of foreign policy. It follows that populist governance can also alter the substance of foreign policy in terms of agenda setting, defining problems, and evaluating policy alternatives, among other things. In contrast to supranational and technocratic governance, populists speak of the need to restore sovereignty not only in domestic politics but also at the international level. At the same time, however, sovereignist

⁶ Daniel F. Wajner and Philip Giurlando, “Introduction to Populist Foreign Policy (PFP)”, in *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene*, ed. by Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 2.

⁷ Wajner and Giurlando, “Introduction”.

⁸ Wajner and Giurlando, “Introduction”, 5.

⁹ Cas Mudde, “The populist zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2004), pp. 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>; Sandra Destradi,

David Cadier, and Johannes Plagemann, “Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction)”, *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2021), pp. 663–682. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4>

¹⁰ Wajner and Giurlando, “Introduction”, 10.

¹¹ Paul Taggart, “Populism”, Buckingham – Philadelphia: Open University Press (2000), p. 2–8.

¹² Wajner and Giurlando, “Introduction”, 12.

¹³ Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann, “Populism and foreign policy”, p. 667.

discourses become part of transnational narratives, leading to the formation of new alliances on the international stage¹⁴. Populism also manifests itself on the discursive level, where the position of “genuine leaders” is established through scandals, dramas, and “affective relationships of martyrdom and heroism with regional and global publics”¹⁵. In Central Europe, populist discourse in foreign policy is characterized—particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine—by “crisis talk” and “war rhetoric”¹⁶. Thus, since the refugee crisis of 2015—and also in the context of the war in Ukraine—foreign policy in Central Europe has begun to represent a “useful arena for populists that allows the performance of crises and the construction of threatening external others”¹⁷.

With regard to “populist foreign policy” in Central and Eastern Europe, publications to date have focused more on the phenomenon of Viktor Orbán, or on Poland during the Law and Justice government (2015–2023)¹⁸, and less to Slovakia, even though Slovakia has had a longer history of populist governance, even in the period before 1993 when it was a part of Czecho-Slovakia. This populist experience includes governments dominated by the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS, 1992–1994, 1994–1998), Smer-SD (2006–2010, 2012–2020, and after 2023), but the governments of Igor Matovič (2020–2021) and Eduard Heger (2021–2023) can also be considered populist. This means that populists of various political orientations were in power

in Slovakia for a total of 24 years after 1989, which certainly cannot be characterized as a “populist episode”, as described by Kopper et al.¹⁹ It is true, however, that, apart from the 1990s, the populist model of governance did not significantly translate into foreign policy in practice. On the other hand, such a long period of populist governance in the case of Slovakia demonstrates the considerable effectiveness and vitality of this model. This raises the question of to what extent Taggart’s assertion about the “episodic,” and thus short-lived, character of populism—due to its chameleon-like nature—holds true.²⁰

Another important aspect I will focus on is the issue of de-Europeanization in the policies of the Smer-SD party, both in terms of ideology and identification with partner parties in the EU, and in terms of foreign policy—at the levels of individual decisions and substantively connected multiple decisions (policies).²¹ Spasimir Domaradzki distinguishes between two levels of de-Europeanization—a departure from European values and institutional and procedural de-Europeanization.²² By “de-Europeanization,” I therefore mean a progressive “disengagement between the EU and the national level,” which implies that it should be traced over time and perceived as a process rather than an outcome. It concerns the weakening of the EU’s political or normative influence, whereby de-Europeanization presupposes prior Europeanization²³.

¹⁹ Kopper, Szalai, and Góra, “Populist Foreign Policy”, 93.

²⁰ Taggart, “Populism”, p. 106.

²¹ Gunther Hellmann, “Lamed Power: Germany and European Integration”, in Gunther Hellmann (ed.), *Germany’s EU Policy on Asylum and Defence. De-Europeanization by Default?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2006), pp. 163, 165.

²² Spasimir Domaradzki “Opportunistic legitimisation and de-Europeanisation as a reverse effect of Europeanisation”, *Global Discourse*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 221–44 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15470487645475>; Spasimir Domaradzki, “Wymiar deuropeizacji – Dimensions of De-Europeanization”, *Athenaeum*, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 155–173.

²³ Tomini, Luca, and Gürkan. Seda, “Contesting the EU, Contesting Democracy and

¹⁴ Wajner and Giurlando, “Introduction”, 16–18.

¹⁵ Wajner and Giurlando, “Introduction”, 14.

¹⁶ Akos Kopper, Andras Szalai, and Magdalena Góra, “Populist Foreign Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Hungary and the Shock of the Ukraine Crisis”, in *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene*, ed. by Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 92.

¹⁷ Kopper, Szalai, and Góra, “Populist Foreign Policy”, 91.

¹⁸ Angelos Chrysosgelos, *Is there a populist foreign policy?*, Chatham House. Europe Programme (March 2021). <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/there-populist-foreign-policy>, accessed on? [date]

The presence of de-Europeanization—whether at the discursive, procedural, or institutional level—is becoming an integral part of the political practice of populist parties. It stems from their emphasis on “sovereignty.” At the same time, however, when these parties come to power, their populist practices encounter limitations stemming from governmental responsibility as well as—in the case of the EU—from the complex nature of European integration and the decision-making mechanisms applied within European institutions²⁴.

The “Eastern policy” of Smer-SD before the February 2022

Prime Minister Fico’s stance toward Ukraine was shaped by several events that occurred prior to the Russian Federation’s annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014. Mutual relations had been characterized by a low level of trust since 2008, when gas supplies to Central Europe were halted as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian trade dispute. At that time, Fico blamed Ukraine for the crisis; later, after 2014, he repeatedly expressed criticism of the manner in which President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted. He described the events in Ukraine at that time as a dispute between Russia and the U.S.²⁵ Nevertheless, Slovakia condemned the annexation of Crimea, because changing borders in Europe threatens Slovakia’s national interests and national security. The principle

Rule of Law in Europe. Conceptual Suggestions for Future Research,” in *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe*, ed. by Astrid Lorenz and Lisa H. Anders, 285–300. London: Palgrave Macmillan (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54674-8_12; Lia Tsuladze, Nino Abzianidze, Mariam Amashukeli, and Lela Javakhishvili, “De-Europeanization as discursive disengagement: has Georgia ‘got lost’ on its way to European integration?”, *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 297–319, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2278072>

²⁴ Paul Taggart, “Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2004), pp. 269–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263528>

²⁵ Andrej Sarvaš, Miroslav Kern, and Dušan Mikušovič, “Konflikt na Ukrajine je bojom Ruska s Amerikou”, *Sme*, September 4 (2014), <https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/fico-konflikt-na-ukrajine-je-bojom-ruska-s-amerikou>

of territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders in Europe is a point of consensus among the overwhelming majority of political parties in the Slovak Republic. Even those political forces that in 2014 were focused on building good relations with Russia and were sometimes critical of the West were forced to adopt a critical stance toward Russia, such as the Direction – Social Democracy party. The only political force that openly supported and continues to support Russia’s policy toward Ukraine is the neo-Nazi People’s Party – Our Slovakia, led by Marian Kotleba. At the same time, however, Fico criticized the policy of sanctions against the Russian Federation, which, in his view, threatened the economic interests of both Slovakia and the entire EU, even though he did not block their adoption.

Although the Smer-SD party framed Ukraine in a critical light, it avoided framing Russia in a similar way. After 2014, Fico declared a negative stance toward Ukraine’s NATO membership, while at the same time striving to build good relations with Russia. Unlike Presidents Andrej Kiska (2014–2019) and Zuzana Čaputová (2019–2024) and most center-right parties, who expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine, Fico limited his support to the issue of EU membership as well as the provision of humanitarian and transitional aid. At the same time, he declared his opposition to labeling Russia as an enemy of Slovakia. On this issue, Smer-SD thus aligned itself with the policies of pro-Russian national-conservative parties such as the SNS, the People’s Party Our Slovakia (renamed the Republika Party after 2020), and the nationally or Slavic-oriented spectrum of non-governmental organizations. Smer-SD’s pro-Russian rhetoric escalated following the anti-corruption protests in early 2018, when the scope for cooperation between the party and pro-European parties was minimized. This is also evidenced by Smer-SD’s reaction to these protests, which its representatives

likened to Ukraine's "Maidan"—naturally with negative connotations as an act of attack on legitimate government authority. Smer-SD's political isolation increased its dependence on anti-Western forces, which contributed to the strengthening of pro-Russian rhetoric within the party and criticism of the policy of sanctions against the Russian Federation—though Slovakia did not exercise its veto power.

The shifting coalition potential of Smer-SD, the rise in popularity of the far right (the entry of ĽS NS into parliament between 2016 and 2020), and the escalation of the conflict between the West and Russia in connection with developments in Ukraine led to a further transformation of Smer-SD. After attempting to position itself as a centrist-populist or anti-establishment reform party²⁶, it began to align its agenda with that of right-wing populist parties and increasingly incorporated hard Euroscepticism and hostility toward the EU into its platform, while defining migration as the primary source of threat. Prior to 2020, Slovakia opposed the introduction of so-called refugee quotas (in 2015); later, it limited its participation in the drafting of the so-called WHO Pandemic Treaty and has also advocated for preserving the veto rights of EU member states to the greatest extent possible. These shifts in the party's agenda confirm the "chameleon-like" nature of the Smer-SD party's policy, which adapts to the current political climate as well as to potential political allies on the domestic and international stages²⁷.

The shift in Smer-SD's foreign policy was influenced by several factors. The first of these is the traditionally high level of sym-

pathy among a large segment of the Slovak public toward the Russian Federation, stemming from a historically rooted perception of Russia as an ally of the Slovaks dating back to the 19th century, when Slovakia was part of the Habsburg Monarchy²⁸. A large portion of the population shares the view that Slovakia is not an integral part of the West and would prefer the country's position to be "between East and West". According to a public opinion survey commissioned by the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 46.4 percent of respondents in Slovakia in June 2024 favored a Western geopolitical orientation, but a significant portion of respondents (39.5 percent) would prefer a balanced position between Russia and the West. However, in May 2023, before the elections, 44.9 percent favored a balanced position between the West and Russia, while only 37.7 percent supported Slovakia's unequivocal alignment with the West²⁹. The Smer-SD's position reflects the volatility of Slovak voters' foreign policy orientation, with their views often influenced by other factors, such as domestic political considerations.

In this case, it can be assumed that Slovak "Russophilia" may also be rooted in frustration over the social costs of post-communist transformation. The role of foreign policy as a factor in political mobilization increased following the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022. During the period in question, i.e., from 2020

²⁸ Mateusz Gniazdowski "Panslavizmus svetozára Hurbana Vajanského a jeho vzťah k Poliakom a poľskej otázke", *Studia Politica Slovaca*, Vol. 18. No.1 (2025), pp. 6-26. <https://doi.org/10.31577/SPS.2025-1.1>; Juraj Marušák, "Slovakia: Emergence of an Old-New Pseudo-Pan-Slavism in the Context of the Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine After 2014", in Mikhail Suslov, Marek Čejka, and Vladimír Ďorđević (eds), *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 329-355. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17875-7_16; Duleba, "The Blind Pragmatism".

²⁹ Facebook, Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, July 8, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/sociologickyustav/photos/pod%C4%BEa-druhej-tla%C4%BDovej-spr%C3%A1vy-z-novej-vlno-v%C3%BDskumu-ako-sa-m%C3%A1te-slovensko-ktor%C3%BD-re/969203168337272/>

²⁶ Učeň, "Parties, Populism"; Seán Hanley and Allan Sikk, "Economy, corruption or floating voters? Explaining the breakthroughs of anti-establishment reform parties in eastern Europe," *Party Politics*, vol. 22, No. 4 (2016), pp. 522-533.

²⁷ Dominika Mikucka-Wójtowicz, "The Chameleon Nature of Populist Parties. How Recurring Populism is Luring 'the People' of Serbia and Croatia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 71, no. 3 (2019), pp. 458-459, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1590534>.

to 2023, the Slovak government was formed by an internally unstable coalition of center-right parties (Ordinary People and the Independent Personalities, We Are Family, Freedom and Solidarity, and For the People). Although this coalition held a constitutional majority (three-fifths of the seats) following the 2020 parliamentary elections, it soon lost its absolute majority. Public dissatisfaction stemmed not only from the coalition's communication with the public but also from its pandemic response.³⁰ Smer-SD took a radically oppositional stance toward this coalition.

The foreign policy agenda became an important part of the opposition's platform, as the coalition took unequivocally Euro-Atlantic stances. An example of the instrumentalization of foreign policy was the protests against the bilateral defense treaty between Slovakia and the U.S. on the eve of the Russian invasion.³¹ Smer-SD, along with other opposition parties, notably ĽSNS and Republika, denied the possibility of Russian aggression against Ukraine until the very last moment; on the contrary, they accused the West, NATO, and the Slovak government of having aggressive intentions. As late as the end of January 2022, according to a Focus poll, as many as 44 percent of respondents blamed the U.S. for escalating tensions on the Ukrainian-Russian border, while nearly 33 percent blamed Russia. After the outbreak of the war, public opinion shifted dramatically for a short time. According to a February 25, 2022,

AKO poll, as many as 62 percent of the population held Russia responsible for the war, while 25 percent held the U.S. responsible. Other culprits included NATO (8.9 percent), Ukraine (7.8 percent), and the EU (5 percent)³². Although the majority of MPs from the opposition parties Smer-SD (including its leader Robert Fico) and Hlas-SD voted in favor of the resolution condemning Russia's aggression, the representatives of ĽS NS and Republika, as well as some prominent Smer-SD MPs, did not participate in the vote (Ľuboš Blaha, Ladislav Kamenický, Dušan Jariabek, Ján Podmanický), unlike party chairman Robert Fico.

Slovak governments from 2020 to 2023 also actively participated in providing military aid to Ukraine. However, this policy was the subject of political polarization. While pro-Ukrainian policies enjoyed strong support immediately after the start of the full-scale invasion, according to the Globsec poll, by March 2023 as many as 34 percent of respondents claimed that the war was the result of Western provocations against Russia, while another 17 percent accused Ukraine of oppressing its Russian-speaking population³³. In May 2023, as many as 33% of Slovak respondents expressed support for withdrawing from NATO³⁴. Smer-SD's pro-Russian rhetoric thus had the backing of a significant portion of the public. All parties in the future governing coalition—Smer-SD, SNS, and Hlas-SD (which, however, took a more pro-European stance during the pre-election

³⁰ Radoslav Štefančík, *Radikálny populizmus v ére pandémie COVID-19 a vojny na Ukrajine*, Bratislava: Ekonom (2022), pp. 29–30; 174–179; Michał Lubicz Miszewski and Juraj Marušiak, "Skutki społeczne pandemii COVID-19 w Republice Słowackiej", *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 20 (2022), no. 3, pp. 61–96, <https://doi.org/10.36874/RIESW.2022.3.3>.

³¹ *Agreement on Defense Cooperation Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Slovak Republic*, Washington D.C., February 3 (2022). Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic – official website, <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4773714/220207-dohoda-obranna-spolupraca-USA-EN.pdf/523a3aeb-4032-4886-8a1c-5260d27ed61e>

³² Peter Blaško, "Exclusive Survey for HN: Slovaks Have Changed Their Minds. Most People Think Russia Is to Blame for the War," *Hospodárske noviny*, February 26 (2022). <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/22558282-prieskum-vojna-na-ukrajine-cto-je-zodpovedny>

³³ Alexander Duleba, "The end of Fico's 'two-track' Eastern Policy in 2024," in Peter Brežani (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2024*, Bratislava: RC SFPA (2025), p. 130.

³⁴ Krzysztof Żarna, "The Russo-Ukrainian War in the Campaign Preceding the Parliamentary Elections in the Slovak Republic (September 30, 2023)," *Przegląd Politologiczny*, Vol. 31, No.1 (2026), pp. 10–21, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pp.2026.31.1.2>.

campaign)—called for a “four-directions” foreign policy in their election platforms. In its sharp anti-Western rhetoric, Smer-SD spoke primarily of the need for a “sovereign foreign policy.” At the same time, in the spirit of identitarian ethno-populism, its leader, Robert Fico, described the war in Ukraine as one in which “Slavs were being slaughtered because of certain geopolitical interests”³⁵. After exploiting Slovak-Hungarian ethnic tensions prior to 2012 and stoking fears of the arrival of refugees from non-European countries between 2016 and 2020, he began speaking after 2022 about a potential conflict between the West and the “Slavs.”

Although Smer-SD criticized EU and NATO policies, particularly regarding Russia, it simultaneously rejected withdrawal from the EU and NATO. However, it described the policies of the governments at the time as “subservient” and harmful to Slovakia’s interests, while labeling the coalition parties—as well as its strongest rival, the then-extra-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia (PS)—as “tools of foreign interests.” This party also identified NGOs as another enemy promoting foreign interests.³⁶ Although the most radical anti-EU rhetoric was promoted by the far-right party Republika (formed in 2020 after splitting from the neo-Nazi ĽSNS), Smer-SD exhibited the most dynamic de-Europeanization tendencies in 2023³⁷. In addition to sovereignty, Smer-SD’s pre-election foreign policy agenda also employed other elements of populist mobilization strate-

gies—spreading a sense of fear and crisis, anti-elitism, a Manichaean division of society into two opposing camps, and the chameleon-like nature of its rhetoric. Although the party chairman verbally condemned Russian aggression, rhetoric rejecting military aid to Ukraine gradually came to the forefront of Smer-SD’s discourse.

National Elections 2023 – a new milestone of Slovakia’s “Eastern policy”

Despite significant differences in rhetoric between Smer-SD and SNS on one side and Hlas-SD—which, since its inception, had espoused the policies of European social democratic parties—these parties formed a new governing coalition in the fall of 2023. Smer-SD filled key foreign policy posts within the coalition. Smer-SD nominees filled all key foreign policy posts within the coalition: Robert Fico as Prime Minister, Juraj Blanár as Foreign Minister, and Robert Kaliňák as Defense Minister. The very first steps signaled a break with the country’s previous foreign policy, as the new government fulfilled Smer-SD’s campaign promise and halted the provision of free military aid to Ukraine³⁸. The party’s longstanding discursive ‘de-Europeanization’ thus began to translate into concrete policy actions.

R. Fico defined his party’s election victory as “the end of the rule of non-governmental organizations in Slovakia”³⁹. NGOs are framed in Smer-SD rhetoric as actors promoting foreign interests. Strengthening relations with Russia has also become part

³⁵ Aliaksiej Kazharski, “On the nexūs Between Populism and Geopolitical rhetorics: Evidence from the Visegrád Four”, *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i3.1373>.

³⁶ Veronika Bundžiková and Denis Janšta, “Slovakia’s 2023 Elections: Framing of Foreign Policy Preferences by Populists”, *Politologický časopis – Czech Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2024), pp. 197–198.

³⁷ Jaroslav Mihálik, Jakub Bardovič, and Peter Orosz, “From European dreams to nationalist drift: the state of de-Europeanization in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia”, *Society Register*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2025), pp. 24–25. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sr.2025.9.3.01>

³⁸ Henrieta Mihalková, “Vláda nepošle už na Ukrajinu ani náboj. Fico: zásielky zbraní a munície zo štátnych skladov sa skončili”, *Pravda*, November 8 (2023). <https://www.pravda.sk/spravy/domace/clanok/687769-vojenska-pomoc-ukrajine-koniec-robert-kalinak-robert-fico-nova-vlada-zastavila>

³⁹ Viktória Némethová, “Fico opäť nešetril mimovládky. Plánuje ich označiť za zahraničných agentov”, *Noviny.sk*, October 18 (2023). <https://www.noviny.sk/politika/847294-fico-opat-nesetril-mimovladky-planuje-ich-oznacit-za-zahranicnych-agentov>

of this “sovereign foreign policy,” despite the ongoing sanctions imposed on that country by the EU as a result of its invasion of Ukraine. The government justifies this, on the one hand, by Slovakia’s continuing dependence on supplies of Russian energy resources (oil, natural gas, and nuclear fuel), but also by its ambition to become a country that will play a key role in restoring normal relations with Russia after the war ends⁴⁰. R. Fico thus positions himself as a defender of Slovakia’s interests while simultaneously seeking to strengthen his standing within the EU. Fico’s meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin (working visit in December 2024, bilateral meetings during the Victory Day celebrations in 2025 and 2026) were also accompanied by his criticism of the EU. Another development was the escalation of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric by Slovak government officials⁴¹. Government officials framed Ukraine itself, rather than Russian aggression, as the primary security threat to Slovakia. For example, in connection with the civil protests at the beginning of 2025, Fico accused Ukrainian intelligence services of plotting a coup in Slovakia⁴². He took a similarly anti-Ukrainian stance in connection with the interruption of natural gas supplies resulting from the need to repair the “Bratstvo” (Brotherhood) gas pipeline, which had been damaged by Russian bombing.⁴³ Part of the pro-governmental media, but also sometimes the politicians, also accuse Ukraine and the West of escalating the military conflict into one that could take on a global character.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Duleba, “The end of Fico’s”, pp. 125–126.

⁴¹ Bundžíková and Janšta, “Slovakia’s 2023 Elections”, p. 200.

⁴² TASR, “Ukrajina kritizuje Ficove vyhlásenia o prevrate na Slovensku”, *Aktuality.sk*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/5u38Qke/ukrajina-kritizuje-ficove-vyhlasenia-o-prevrate-na-slovensku/>

⁴³ Jozef Ryník, “Ako je to s ruským plynom? Slovensko sa slabo pripravilo, Fico zavádza a zveličuje”, *Sme*, December 31 (2024), <https://www.sme.sk/index/c/plyn-rusko-ukrajina-dodavky-cena-2>

⁴⁴ Ángel Torres-Adán, “Has World War III started? Geopolitical preferences, conspiratorial thinking and individual threat perceptions of a global conflict in Slovakia”, *European Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2026), pp. 124–147, doi:10.1080/09662839.2025

At the turn of 2025 and 2026, Slovakia opposed the European Union’s decision to grant a “war” loan of 90 billion euros to Ukraine. Like the Czech Republic and Hungary, it declared that it would not participate in guaranteeing the loan. At the same time, however, it did not block the loan from being granted⁴⁵.

Alongside the discursive steps justifying the shift toward de-Europeanization in foreign policy, institutional measures also followed. In the past, during governments dominated by Smer-SD, the position of foreign minister was held by technocrats. Ministers Ján Kubiš (2006–2009) and Miroslav Lajčák (2009–2010 and 2012–2020) were career diplomats; similarly, governments after 2020 also filled the post of Minister of Foreign and European Affairs with career diplomats (Ivan Korčok, Rastislav Káčer, and Miroslav Wlachovský), who also had no direct ties to political parties. The role of political parties in foreign policy was thus relatively weak. After 2023, Smer-SD decided to nominate a politician, the party’s vice-chairman Juraj Blanár, for this post. His appointment was justified by R. Fico precisely by the need to weaken the power of the elites: “We need a pike that, perhaps in an unconventional way, will stir up the old carps in the pond of Slovak diplomacy—a pond that pretends to be untouchable and intended only for elites like Káčer, Korčok, Demeš, and company.”⁴⁶ On the one hand, this anti-elitist and, at first glance, democratizing move was accompanied by the removal of NGOs (also viewed as part of the transnational elite) from the decision-making process. Long-standing cooperation,

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⁴⁵ TASR, “Ukrajina dostane peniaze aj bez súhlasu Slovenska a Maďarska”, *Aktuality*, March 11 (2026). <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/rpF4Tlv/maďarsko-a-slovensko-ukrajine-skrť-cez-rozpocet-neurobia-europska-unia-ma-udajne-plan-b-v-pripade-blokovania-pozicky/>

⁴⁶ “Novým šéfom slovenskej diplomacie bude Juraj Blanár”, *Pravda*, October 19 (2023). <https://www.pravda.sk/spravy/domace/clanok/685533-novym-sefom-slovenskej-diplomacie-bude-juraj-blanar>

including the provision of grants to NGOs, was terminated, and the existing consultation mechanisms were not replaced with new ones. Unlike in Poland—where Law and Justice (2015–2023) could draw upon established conservative counter-elites to replace legacy diplomatic cadres⁴⁷—Smer-SD lacked an existing pool of aligned foreign policy experts. Foreign policy decision-making processes thus became more “sovereign” (i.e., controlled by the governing parties), but not more transparent, since it is unknown where and by whom its substantive priorities are formulated.

However, Smer-SD is attempting, at least through one-off events, to simulate the emergence of counter-elites (e.g., by organizing the conference “Sovereign Policy of the Sovereign States of Central Europe” in April 2026 under the auspices of Tibor Gašpar, Vice Chair of the National Council of the Slovak Republic), framed by some pro-governmental media as “Anti-Globsec” (i.e., in opposition to the international security conference Globsec Forum, organized by the Slovak NGO Globsec, first in Bratislava and later in Prague). The conference was attended by representatives of far-right parties from Central Europe⁴⁸. However, Smer-SD is also taking practical steps to build a counter-elite in diplomacy loyal to the party’s policies. After 2023, personnel changes took place at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, justified by economic reasons and austerity policies. However, according to some former employees, the main reasons were political.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jakub Drozdž, “Foreign Policy Counter-Elite and Durability of Populist Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2026), p. 123. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orago09>; Kopper, Szalai, and Góra, “Populist Foreign Policy”, 92.

⁴⁸ Martin Hodás, “Gašpar starší hostil poľského antisemitu, Gašpar mladší zamlčal akciu proti Rusom”, *Sme.sk*, April 12 (2026). <https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/gaspar-stars-i-hos-ti-l-polskeho-nacka-gaspar-mladsi-zamlcal-akciu-proti-rusom-dezinformajak-73>

⁴⁹ SITA, “Bývalí zamestnanci ministerstva zahraničia podali na rezort hromadnú žalobu”, *Sme*, April 3 (2025). <https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/byvali-zamestnanci-minis-terstva-zahranicia-podali-na-rezort-hromadnu-zalobu>

Subsequently, another 146 people were reportedly hired—graduates of Russian schools such as MGIMO or St. Petersburg State University, from which Russian intelligence services traditionally recruit informants.⁵⁰

As Wajner et al. note, contesting international institutions is also an element of populist foreign policy⁵¹. At the discursive level, these expressions were accompanied by institutional steps toward the de-Europeanization of the Smer-SD and Hlas-SD parties vis-à-vis the social democratic parties of the EU. As early as December 2017, R. Fico declared at the Smer-SD party convention that Smer-SD stood for “Slovak, not Brussels’ social democracy.” This referred to the party’s stance on migration policy, as well as the need for a stronger national focus, the defense of the traditional Slovak way of life, a more critical stance toward EU migration policy and sanctions against Russia, and anti-liberal and anti-LGBT rhetoric.⁵² Smer-SD is using a marketing name, “Slovak Social Democracy”; however, the party had not changed the name under which it is officially registered as of July 2026.

Conversely, “Brussels” symbolizes, in Smer-SD’s rhetoric, first liberalism and, after 2020, “progressivism.” The latter is also associated with the name of Progressive Slovakia (PS), the main opposition party since 2023, thereby becoming a non-Slovak political force in Smer-SD’s rhetoric. Due to its formation of a

⁵⁰ Victor Breiner and Martin Hodás, “Blanárovi radi antisemite. Ministrom nechcel byť, ľudia sa ho boja, hovorí bývalý diplomat”, *Sme*, November 3 (2025). <https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/blanarovi-radi-antisemita-ministrom-nechcel-byt-ludia-sa-ho-boja-hovo-ri-byvaly-diplomat>

⁵¹ Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi, and Michael Zürn. “The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs,” *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 5 (2024), pp. 1819–1833. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae217>.

⁵² Marek Rybář, “The 2023 Slovak Parliamentary Elections: Fico’s Return to Power is Likely but the New Government May Not Last Long”, in *Party Systems & Government Observatory*, October 1 (2023). <https://whogoverns.eu/the-2023-slovak-parliamentary-elections-ficos-return-to-power-is-likely-but-the-new-government-may-not-last-long/>

coalition with the far-right SNS, Smer-SD's membership in the Party of European Socialists (PES) was suspended from 2006 to 2008. The PES once again suspended Smer-SD's membership for the same reason in the fall of 2023, and in 2025, Smer-SD was officially expelled from the PES.⁵³ While Smer-SD made active efforts to reinstate its membership after 2006 and both sides tried to find the political rapprochement, Smer-SD did not do so after 2023. The political and ideological de-Europeanization resulted into the complete institutional de-Europeanization. The example of Smer-SD illustrates de-Europeanization as both a top-down and bottom-up process, which resulted in mutual disengagement.

In lieu of conclusions—opportunities and limits of populist foreign policy

Fico's euro-critical policy and pursuit of pragmatic engagement with the Russian Federation reflect structural domestic demand rather than purely idiosyncratic posturing. This is confirmed not only by the election results of this party—which, with the sole exception of the years 2020–2023, has been the strongest parliamentary force since 2006—but also by the voter base in terms of socioeconomic preferences and cultural inclinations. According to a 2025 survey conducted by NMS Market Research and Chapel Hill, the traditionalist left segment (economically left-leaning, culturally conservative voters) comprises 44 percent of voters, making it the largest segment of society.⁵⁴ Smer-SD frames its divergence from EU consensus around the

Russia-Ukraine war in terms of national economic interest—a posture characterized in international relations literature as 'hedging'⁵⁵—a strategy employed by small states with limited ability to influence the policies of powerful global actors. This position forces them to diversify their foreign relations in order to avoid one-sided dependence.

On the other hand, the country's economic interests will limit the extent of Slovakia's post-2023 foreign policy reorientation. Firstly, although Slovakia has halted the provision of military aid to Ukraine, it continues to supply military equipment to Ukraine on a commercial basis as it would damage local commercial defense manufacturing interests⁵⁶. Slovakia has not blocked either the European Union's provision of military loans to Ukraine or sanctions against the Russian Federation. Secondly, Slovakia remains interested in participating in the EU-funded post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, which it views as an opportunity for Slovak businesses and the development of Slovakia's eastern regions bordering Ukraine. For this reason, it maintains government-to-government contacts with Ukraine. Thirdly, the scope for "de-Europeanizing" Slovakia's foreign policy on issues related to the Russia-Ukraine war has significantly diminished due to the changing regional dynamics following Viktor Orbán's electoral defeat in April 2026.

In addition to criticism from the pro-Ukrainian opposition, Fico also faces discontent from the more radical wing of pro-Russian forces, including the coalition party SNS and the extra-parliamentary Republic party, which may become a future coalition partner of Smer. SNS Chairman Andrej Danko has criticized Fi-

⁵³ Vincenzo Genovese, "European Socialists expel Slovakian PM's party for values breach", *Euronews*, October 17 (2025). <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/10/17/european-parliaments-centre-left-group-expels-slovakia-pms-party-for-values-breach>

⁵⁴ Michal Mislavič and Denisa Lakatošová, "Politické postoje Slovákov: Sme ľavicári s tradičnými hodnotami", *NMS Market Research – official website*, September 9 (2025). <https://nms.global/sk/politicke-postoje-slovakov-sme-laviciari-s-tradicnymi-hodnotami/>

⁵⁵ Joan DeBardeleben, "Hungary, Slovakia, and the Ukraine War: explaining the outliers", *International Politics*, (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-026-00754-9>.

⁵⁶ Jozef Tvardzik, "Ani náboj na Ukrajinu? Žiadna iná krajina nerastie vo vývoze zbraní tak ako Slovensko", *Sme*, January 12, 2026. <https://www.sme.sk/index/c/ani-naboj-na-ukrajinu-ziadna-ina-krajina-tak-nenarastla-vo-vyvoze-zbrani-ako-slovensko>

co's statements in support of Ukraine's integration into the EU, while other pro-Russian politicians accuse him of double-dealing.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, former advisor to Fico, Eduard Chmelár, has publicly questioned the purpose of Fico's repeated trips to Moscow and his ability to play a more significant role in brokering peace between Russia and Ukraine.⁵⁸

Despite the aforementioned limitations, however, it must be noted that the de-Europeanization and populist tendencies in Smer-SD's foreign policy after 2020—or, more specifically, after its return to power in 2023—have moved beyond the discursive level and are shifting to the procedural and institutional levels. In Slovakia, populist foreign policy thus goes beyond mere rhetoric.⁵⁹ Following its electoral defeat in 2020, Smer-SD's populist and illiberal rhetoric has become more radical. It is precisely foreign policy—particularly regarding the EU and the party's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war—that has become the new agenda, allowing the party to present itself as an anti-elitist force despite having been in power for 15 years, during which time it has played a dominant role in every government. Although the relevant foreign policy elites have not yet been formed for the period 2023–2026, as was the case, for example, in Poland under the Law and Justice government, Smer-SD is shaping new patterns of Slovakia's conduct on the international stage, which may influence Slovakia's foreign policy in the medium and long term as well.

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⁵⁷ Anton Filippov, "Why Fico changed his rhetoric towards Kyiv and how he could lose his pro-Russian electorate", *European Pravda*, May 8 (2026). <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2026/05/8/7237131/>

⁵⁸ Diana Štrusová and Magdaléna Svetláková, "Fico ako mierotvorca? Chmelár v ťaž: Nemá moc, Putin a Zelenskyj ho nepotrebujú. Únia má „veľkohubé“ reči", *TA3 TV*, May 11, 2026. <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1048999/fico-ako-mierotvorca-chmelar-v-taz-nema-moc-putin-a-zelenskyj-ho-nepotrebuju-unia-ma-velkohube-reci>

⁵⁹ Bundzíková and Janšta, "Slovakia's 2023 Elections".

