

A stylized map of Slovakia composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to indicate specific locations or points of interest.

# Transformation Experiences in Slovakia

## Governing Uncertainty

**DARINA MALOVÁ**  
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- Almost three decades of transformation have produced a rather mixed political system in Slovakia, including a weakly institutionalized party system with elitist and personalized parties that have failed to establish strong and stable ties with (civil) society.
- The transformation in Slovakia can be divided into four periods distinguished according to the dominant structuring issues: (1) democracy and nation-state (1989–1998); (2) EU accession and international recognition (1998–2002); (3) adjusting the market economy and social state (2006–2015); and (4) corruption and clientelism (since 2016).
- Continuously high levels of corruption promote low levels of popular trust in national political institutions and democracy and the previously stabilizing role of the EU has been recently undermined due to the economic and migration crises.
- The European Union has functioned as the key anchor in unprecedented political, economic and social transformations. Yet, the social dimension, regional disparities and corruption have been neglected.
- The weak institutionalization and low stability of individual parties has frequently challenged the consolidation of liberal democracy in Slovakia. Neglecting pro-European and liberal education and awareness of universal values can backfire very easily, especially in the new as well as in the older European democracies.
- Progressive forces should overcome fragmentation and offer a new political programme that would unite the majority of population and stop the rise of extremism.



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## 1. Introduction

Slovakia's post-1989 history has been marked with serious political conflicts over the course of transformation that is widely understood as a set of profound structural changes that involved the process of »triple transition«: from autocracy to democracy; from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy; and a redefinition of statehood, including the nation-building process (Offe 1991). Transformation in Slovakia has included a large degree of unpredictability in all three areas. Compared to other Central Eastern European countries (CEEC) throughout the 1990s Slovakia was categorized as a weakly institutionalized and unconsolidated democracy, with less favourable structural conditions, difficult historical legacies and with a nationalist political elite, as several democratic indices (BTI, SGI, EIU and FH-NIT<sup>1</sup>) suggested. The Slovak case represents a rather exceptional case – for a substantial period the country was lagging behind its neighbours in transformation and in the process of accession to the European Union (EU). The EU has played a key role in the country's transformation and has helped to balance uncertainties created by murky privatizations in the 1990s, difficulties in nation/state building and multiple overlapping political cleavages that produced unstable party politics.

However, since the March 2016 parliamentary elections the situation has become more complicated as previously established party politics has been shaken by the entry of the extremist far-right party »Peoples Party – Our Slovakia« (ĽS-NS), by destabilization of the mainstream parties and emergence of business-like parties.<sup>2</sup> The 2016 elections produced a fractious parliament with eight parties and – more importantly – a four-member governing coalition of strange bedfellows as it includes social democrats, centre-right conservatives, Slovak nationalists and a primarily ethnic-Hungarian based party. The success of the extreme right-wing »Peoples Party – Our Slovakia« (ĽS-NS), led by Marian Kotleba, with eight per cent of the vote and 14 members of parliament resulted from strong anti-foreigner and anti-refugee sentiments raised by the EU refugee crisis. However, Kotleba's ap-

peal owes more to widespread dissatisfaction with outcomes of transformation. Specifically, the party's voters were clearly disillusioned by the shortcomings in building a social state that was mostly omitted in the whole transformation process. Robert Fico, the leader of the social democratic party Smer-SD (the biggest and the most stable party) has served as Prime Minister for eight years (two governments) and has not articulated a social democratic programme to take the country forward, out of the painful economic and political transformation. Certainly, to create and implement such a programme is very demanding but his governments' policies were non-systematic and incoherent. This has been a missed chance to build institutions of a social state that would help Slovakia's small and open economy cope better with global market forces. Such policies could improve social standards of living, one of the immediate and sensitive expectations associated with the fall of communist rule.

The recent political turmoil resulted from several conditions. Firstly, it has stemmed from structural difficulties such as unemployment, corruption and regional disparities which were not properly addressed by any post-1989 governments. Secondly, it was caused by the failure to secure a more even distribution of transformation's costs and benefits across social groups and regions. Thirdly, while in the past the EU has been functioning as a democratic anchor, this role has been recently weakened by the recent migration crisis. In sum, the existing transformation outcomes in Slovakia need to be adjusted to the new economic, social and political challenges that have shaken the whole EU and paved the way for the rise of anti-European and anti-Western sentiments among groups in the population.

Slovakia's transformation process neglected the social dimension and regional disparities due to the dominance of other political concerns defined by the political elite. Almost three decades after the change of the regime, a majority of the people consider their standard of living as insufficient (Baboš and Világi 2016). This is in stark contrast with their immediate expectations after the collapse of communist rule. Only very tiny social groups benefitted from the transformation (rich, i.e. new owners and so-called financial groups; highly educated – many of those migrated to other EU countries; the others are mostly concentrated in Bratislava and a few bigger cities). The majority of »losers« live in rural regions, outside of the capital. This unbalanced situation provoked the recent rise of nationalism and extremism.

1. BTI – the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI); SGI–the Sustainable Governance Indicators; EIU–Economist Intelligence Unit Index; FHNIT–Freedom House Nations in Transit.

2. Several parties have given up on building party organizations and recruiting members and their leaders run these parties as business companies – just recruiting independent candidates for elections.

We examined the ways in which Slovakia's structural characteristics (socio-economic, ethnic and religious differences) were (mis)used by political elites in formulating the political communication appeals for the elections. The political elite have not effectively addressed three most-sensitive and constant socially-sensitive issues: long-term unemployment, regional disparities and corruption. All these problems reinforced the public's recent dissatisfaction with democracy, triggered anti-EU attitudes and contributed to the rise of populist and extremist politics. For Slovakia – as much as for any other country – the most important issue now is if the government will be able to deliver short-term benefits, particularly to improve employment and transport infrastructure and investments to remedy regional disparities (especially the deep difference between the capital, Bratislava Region and the rest of the country). Given the European Union's multiple crises (economic, refugee and Brexit) it is uncertain if the EU will again function as the democratic anchor, especially as several Slovak parties (SaS, OĽaNO, ĽS-NS) have used strong anti-EU appeals. The future of Slovakia depends on both the improvement of the economy (namely an increase in employment) and the ability of progressive (liberal, democratic and pro-integration) forces to overcome fragmentation and offer a new political programme that would unite the majority of the population. That would lower corruption, transformation costs and overcome divisions and conflicts between the winners and losers.

## 2. Survey: Differences, Divides and Clashes in Transformation

### 2.1 The Main Concern: Employment and Standard of Living

In general, 1989 represents a milestone in terms of political freedoms and democracy, but there is also room to examine satisfaction with the socio-economic changes as that may influence approval of the political regime. The PEW Global Attitudes Survey of 2009 indicated that 29 percent of Slovak citizens declared that they were worse off than they were under communism and 18 percent answered that they are not better off, yet at the same time they expressed the third highest approval (after East Germans and Czechs) of the change to democracy (70 %) of the nine countries surveyed. Slovaks were fourth (66 %) in approving the change to capitalism.

Both Slovak responses were quite stable relative to the baseline attitudes expressed in 1991 (Krause, Skalnick and Wolchik 2014). According to the Eurobarometer survey, citizens in Slovakia have been concerned for several decades mostly with rising prices and the financial situations of their households as the two most important issues. Unemployment is usually ranked at a lower place but it is ranked constantly as one of the top worries; therefore the level of unemployment is used as a proxy to understand the dynamics of satisfaction with the performance of Slovakia's democracy. The correlation between the level of unemployment and the proportion of those citizens who declare they are not satisfied with the way democracy works is high and suggests a linkage between one's well-being and support for democracy (Malová and Dolný 2016).

### 2.2 Transformation Phases According to the Main Cleavages

To better understand this linkage between socio-economic development and support for democracy we identify four phases of the political transformation in Slovakia to describe its main political conflicts and lines of cleavages. The first phase of transformation (1989–1998) was framed mainly by the attitudes toward *democracy and nation*. At the beginning, society was split over the former regime into the communist and the anti-communist camps. The latter included four major movements: (1) the broad anti-communist umbrella movement Public Against Violence (VPN); (2) the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Hungarian coalition challenging the communists from national-ethnic stances; (3) the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) challenging the former regime from a socio-religious view; and (4) the Greens, who opposed communist rule from an ecological standpoint. VPN soon disintegrated and produced a wide variety of political parties and the transformation became complicated by national concerns and appeals. Internal VPN power struggles opened an opportunity for Vladimír Mečiar to organize his own Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and use nationalist and populist appeals to his own – economic – benefit. Mečiar won the 1994 elections and immediately engaged into a sharp conflict with the opposition and the president. His autocratic and corrupt political style, together with nationalist appeals, divided society into two political camps; consequently political parties organized

their competition over their position toward national identity and democracy. The Mečiar-led government called attention to inter-related threats to Slovakia's independence, such as the irredentism (separatism) by Slovakia's Hungarian minority (about 10 percent of the population and territorially-concentrated along the border with neighbouring Hungary), and disloyal Slovaks intending to »sell out« their homeland to foreign investors and the EU. These »patriotic« issues were closely linked with the understanding of democracy; Mečiar, his allies and supporters preferred simple majoritarianism with strong leadership that could defend the country from its enemies, while the fragmented opposition advocated a pro-Western foreign policy orientation and more liberal values. In turn citizens became afraid that Slovakia would be the only country among its ECE neighbours that would be left out of the EU and NATO. These worries prompted the previously fragmented political opposition to unite and form a broad alliance of different NGOs and interest groups, including trade unions, and this broad mobilization led to the defeat of Mečiar in the 1998 elections.

The second stage of democratic transformation (1998–2002) was linked with the »return to Europe«, i. e. international recognition of the country. Slovakia's desire to be internationally accepted produced the most important political consensus (Henderson 2004; Deegan-Krause 2003) that guided a majority of Slovakia's main political parties in formulating their foreign policy goals as well as the national identity. During this period there was no open criticism related to Slovakia's membership in the EU and citizens widely accepted such usually unpopular policies as depreciation of the Slovak currency and restructuring of the state-owned banks that were hugely indebted due to Mečiar's murky privatizations. The 1998 change of government also resulted in compliance with the EU's political conditions and the broad coalition government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda (1998-2002) fully focused on EU accession. Slovakia was invited to begin accession negotiations at the Helsinki summit in December 1999. The influence of the EU over transformation had significantly increased as required legislative and institutional changes related to the EU administration and market economy requirements were easily passed with virtually no opposition. However, the social and regional dimension of EU accession was neglected on the domestic as well as on the EU side.

The third phase of transformation (2002–2016) evolved around the conflict over the role of state and market in public policies that brought three consequent changes of centre-right and centre-left governments. During this period four ideologically different governments were implementing – mostly economic – liberalism. The socio-economic differences and right-left divisions were in the centre of party competition. The first centre-right government (2002–2006) introduced several »neoliberal« structural reforms to foster foreign direct investment (FDI) that could serve as a motor of the economy. To attract FDI this government also set the country's course on adoption of the euro and introduced different stimuli for foreign companies (tax holidays, subsidies for creation of jobs in underdeveloped regions, etc.). The problematic coalition composed of conservatives and liberals failed to modernize the country in cultural terms. Moreover, employment growth proceeded much slower; therefore Robert Fico won the 2006 elections criticizing the right-wing coalition for its neoliberal, anti-social policies. Smer-SD formed a coalition with the discredited populist HZDS and the nationalist SNS that raised serious concerns about the quality of democracy. Fico's core election promise was to build a »strong social state«, but the »reformed« welfare regime under Fico was not systematic and related mostly to one-time direct payments (i. e. a Christmas bonus for pensioners and childbirth allowances). Moreover, his government did not change the most criticized reforms of the previous government, it preserved as the main priority meeting the economic criteria for the adoption of the euro on schedule on 1 January 2009. Slovakia confirmed that even with the nationalist and populist parties in the government it could preserve a functioning multiparty democracy with a market economy, just failing to change the latter to be more socially-oriented. Not surprisingly given the high levels of corruption, the centre-right opposition led by the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) won the 2010 elections by publicly demonstrating the previous government's clientelism and its incapacity to keep public finances under control. The opposition re-offered »reforms« as a remedy for clientelism, corruption, and poor management of public resources. However, it was a short-lived victory: Radičová's government suffered from the outset from internal divisions, and collapsed over the Eurozone crisis.<sup>3</sup> During that time the topic of (governing

3. The SaS (Freedom and Solidarity) party strongly opposed the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) scheme and did not back the prime minister in the vote of confidence.

parties') clientelism – as a factor contributing to the poor governance – has become a part of the dominant socio-economic, left-right competitive axis and in the early March 2012 elections Smer-SD successfully used it in the campaign against SDKÚ-DS and returned to power with 83 parliamentary seats (out of 150); moreover, the five party centre-right opposition was highly fragmented. Prime Minister Fico promised to restore Slovakia's standard of living and pledged social security; however again his social policies remained non-systematic and mostly symbolic, one-time measures.

During the transformation the dominant issues have been changing and since the 2002 elections the booming corruption and party cronyism have prompted popular dissatisfaction and disillusionment. This has elevated the corruption issue above previously dominant conflicts over the economy, democracy and nationalism; therefore this can be marked as the fourth transformation period. Since the 2016 elections the democratic and pro-European political camp has been weakened due to rising distrust of the mainstream political parties and the rise of new populist parties and extremist parties. The mainstream political elite has not been able to offer any new big »project«, i. e. trustworthy ideas uniting the population against populism and extremism. The current democratic backsliding and economic turmoil have resulted mostly from corruption and the low effectiveness of the state in providing health care, employment policy and justice. In sum, this has increased distrust in the basic state institutions.

### 2.3 Party Politics and Structural Divides as a Source of Party Instability

Slovak party politics has been characterized by the presence of several structural divides (centre-periphery, economy, religion, ethnicity). Compared to its Visegrad neighbours Slovakia has always faced more cleavages as the main conflicting political divides. There is common agreement that the number of cleavages was the main source of party system instability in many countries in CEE as well as in Slovakia (Deegan Krause, 2007).

The first and main divide in Slovakia is often considered as a nationalistic one and actually includes Rokkan's classic centre-periphery cleavage, as was related to the conflict over the state-building strategy and was openly formulated by several parties in Slovakia before the split of the Czecho-Slovak Federation, especially by the nationalist SNS and the populist and charismatic HZDS and to some extent by KDH. Similarly as in many new nation states in the post-communist region national divides in Slovakia were accompanied by an authoritarianism-democracy divide. These two overlapping divides have structured Slovakia's party politics until the last decade and they seemed to be weakened by other issues; however, the 2016 elections brought them back. Slovakia's parties articulate national concerns that are often inclined toward some authoritarian or at least statist practices, i. e. preference for the state's intervention into market economy and/or valuing collective (national) concerns over individual rights and liberal freedoms.

Table 1: Transformation Model and Its Problems

Transformation	Main Cleavages	Main Political Actors	Results
1 <sup>st</sup> Period (1989–1998)	Democracy and nationalism	HZDS – Mečiar, SNS – Slota	Independent state, semi-authoritarianism
2 <sup>nd</sup> Period (1998–2002)	Europe, international recognition	SDKÚ – Dzurinda, SDL, KDH, SMK	Accession process to EU and NATO, economic restructuring (financial sector)
3 <sup>rd</sup> Period (2002–2016)	Market economy and social state	SDKÚ-DS – Dzurinda and Radičová Smer-SD – Fico	NATO and full EU membership, structural reforms (flat tax), FDI as the main resource of economic growth, weak social state
4 <sup>th</sup> Period (2016-)	Corruption, clientelism	Mainstream parties versus »new« anti-establishment parties, including far-right extremists	So far, the formation of the broad, left-right coalition

The second conflict on a social and economic level took place between the winners and the losers in economic transformation. However, this is not the only source of the socio-economic cleavage shaping Slovakia's transformation. This cleavage has been also strengthened by disputes over the form, extent, and pace of privatization of state property and economic liberalization – and over the extent of the social protection provided by the state, etc.

The third cleavage has followed ethnic lines between Slovaks and Hungarians and has been continuously shaping party politics in Slovakia and overlaps with the two previous divides, as Hungarians primarily live in southern Slovakia along the border with Hungary. This cleavage has enabled some politicians to mobilize the potential of ethnic differences and linked historical sentiments to increase their popularity. This was the case with populists like Mečiar and Ján Slota, former leader of SNS. Illiberal politicians are always enthusiastic to mobilize citizens around emotions, as they are easily appealed to in the short term and are more difficult to be held accountable in the next elections. Paradoxically, politicians with illiberal inclinations in Slovakia tend to offer social securities to the socially-insecure electorate, while further playing on resentments towards Hungarians.

Parties in Slovakia remain organizationally and ideologically much weaker than their western counterparts. This situation has been created mainly by institutional incentives, as Slovakia introduced a system of state funding for parties and that has strengthened centralizing tendencies within parties. Party leaders thus have very little motivation to enlarge membership. The generous system of state subsidies undermines the need to build links with social groups and non-governmental organizations, and eventually to develop local and regional organizations.

The cross-cutting structure of cleavages resulted in formation of fragmented political and ideological camps complicating institutionalization of the party system (Casal Bértoa 2014, Haughton 2014). However, the pattern of party competition has been characterized by a dominant party in one camp (often using nationalist and/or leftist appeals) and a group of fragmented centre-right parties in the other. These two voting blocs reflect voters' attitudes toward Slovakia's transformation and have been fairly stable in size and ideological prefer-

ence (Gyárfášová and Krivý 2007). The party system can be characterized by a quite polarized confrontation between parties with authoritarian and nationalist tendencies on the one hand and democratic and pro-European attitudes on the other.

The 2016 elections can pave the way to new types of dynamics in party politics and parties' instability, especially to the rise of extremism. During the 1990s some SNS leaders often campaigned with anti-EU and anti-minority positions; however the new SNS leadership has tried to bring the party closer toward the centre. Consequently, a far-right position has been occupied by a new formation, the Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), holding an extreme right position. It first scored in the 2013 regional elections as its leader, Marián Kotleba, was elected a regional president in Central Slovakia. This party uses nationalist appeals, strong negative stances against the Roma minority and often praises Slovakia's former fascist regime.

## 2.4 Weak Civil Society

In theory, interest groups and civil society organizations could compensate for the frailties of weakly-institutionalized party politics in Slovakia and increase the accountability and responsiveness of the political elite. However, Slovakia's civil society has faced significant organizational and structural limits, even if it can benefit from the broad institutional structure.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly it is split into several segments and only a minority of civil society organizations and movements serve as anchors for democracy. For example, a wide variety of NGOs emerged during the anti-Mečiar movement and these continue to act as efficient watchdogs. On the other hand, the most influential organizations (trade unions, employers' associations and trade and professional chambers) have established corporate links with the state and its agencies, therefore they rarely engage in political action beyond their particular interests. The influence of trade unions and the impact of social partnership on policy making have suffered from politicization and an unstable institutional framework. Immediately after the collapse of the communist regime trade unions preferred

4. Since 2001 citizens can access government policy making via collective legislative proposals, although the success remains rather limited and in 2002 Slovakia introduced tax assignment to finance its third sector (NGOs and foundations).

to distance themselves from any political party and tried to integrate working class voters and activists with non-partisan appeals. Smer-SD has established close ties with Slovakia's transformed trade unions, however recently several new trade unions have emerged reflecting public sector employees' dissatisfaction with wage-related negotiations. As a rule, governments in Slovakia actively consult important interest groups but they tend to be politically selective in considering their proposals, and in the end, business and employers' organizations are always the most influential.

Corruption and clientelism emerged as the most pressing political issue that have provoked protests. Revelations that came to be known as »Gorilla«<sup>5</sup> provided information about the influence of the Penta private equity group on the second Dzurinda government (2002-2006) led by SDKÚ-DS. »Gorilla« immediately became a catchphrase for widespread political corruption and the single most resonant issue in the 2012 pre-election discourse. The massive medialization of evidence of corruption led to a series of mass protests around the whole country that reinforced voters' mistrust in the established centre-right parties. Yet this broad mobilization did not result in a proper investigation of this alleged criminal case and did not improve the anti-corruption policies. Even after Smer-SD returned to power, it had its own reasons not to throw more light on the issues raised by Gorilla.

On the one hand, Slovakia has a long and vibrant civil society tradition that includes numerous citizens' associations as well as large interest-based organizations

participating in social dialogue. But on the other hand, the most numerous segment of civil society (citizens' associations) neither receives support from political parties nor manages to organize influential collective action to defend themselves against authoritarian politics. Slovakia is a traditionally protest-averse society, with moderate participation limited to petitions and peaceful rallies.

## 2.5 Economy and Political Culture as a Context of Transformation: Preference for Social Securities

To understand the popular dissatisfaction with outcomes and results of the transformation it is useful to look at the economic development as well as to take into account political culture. In Slovakia during the more than 25 years of transformation the citizens had experienced evident social benefits only during the brief period shortly after the country gained membership in the European Union. In general, the political culture in Slovakia is full of pessimism and scepticism that is widely shared within the population. Slovakia is vulnerable to any global or European recession due to its small, open and highly export-dependent economy and when the 2008 crisis radically changed the external environment (Učej 2015), GDP fell immediately and significantly (see Table 2). The economy experienced a strong but short recession in 2009; however what is specific for Slovakia is its rather long-term negative impact on the labour market (Malová and Dolný 2016). While the post-2009 GDP growth has been one of the strongest in the EU and OECD, employment has not reached the pre-crisis level and unemployment has remained persistently high, only falling just below 10 percent in autumn 2016.

5. The code name of a file leaked from the Slovak Information Service.

Table 2: Economic performance, 2006–2014

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<b>Unemployment rate (%)</b>	13.5	11.2	9.6	12.1	14.5	13.7	14.0	14.2	13.2
<b>Government deficit (% of GDP)</b>	-3.6	-1.9	-2.4	-7.9	-7.5	-4.1	-4.2	-2.6	-2.8
<b>General government gross debt (% of GDP)</b>	30.7	29.9	28.2	36.0	40.8	43.3	52.9	54.6	53.5
<b>Real GDP growth rate (%)</b>	8.5	10.8	5.7	-5.5	5.1	2.8	1.5	1.4	2.5
<b>Foreign Direct Investment (% of GDP)</b>	10.0	6.5	4.9	1.9	2.3	5.6	1.9	1.0	0.0
<b>At-risk-of-poverty rate (%)</b>	11.6	10.6	10.9	11.0	12.0	13.0	13.2	12.8	12.6

Source: Eurostat, respective years.

According to these data the general risk of poverty is relatively low, however strong regional disparities exist. For example, in May 2016 the unemployment rate in Bratislava Region (4.8 percent) was almost three times lower than in Prešov Region (14.47 percent), or in Banská Bystrica Region (13.55 percent) and Košice Region (13.15 percent). The Roma face the highest poverty risk within the Slovak population and the unemployment rate within this community is 70 percent and all the post-1989 governments have failed to reduce these inequalities by promoting efficient social inclusion programmes.

Popular dissatisfaction with health care, social policy and labour code reforms are constant features of political attitudes and have often altered the party composition of the government. The »reformed« welfare regime under the first Fico government was not systematic and related mostly to one-off direct payments (e.g. a Christmas bonus for pensioners and childbirth allowances, see Gould 2009). The rightist opposition parties criticized the government for its »leftist« and »statist« policies and called for measures stimulating the economy and reducing government expenditure. The opposition also blamed the government for its inability to keep public finance under control. Opposition parties offered »reforms« as a remedy for clientelism, corruption, poor management of public resources and susceptibility to the impending »Greek scenario« in public finance. They stressed their greater competence to govern the country in a fiscally responsible manner and blamed the Fico government for increasing the budget deficit during the crisis (see Table 2).

### 3. Explanations: European Union as a Democratic Anchor in Slovakia

Since the 1989 regime change, a desire to be recognized as an equal member of the family of European nations became an inseparable feature of Slovakia's transformation. This aspiration had a general name a »return to Europe« (Henderson 2004). Ján Čarnogurský, (2009: 170) the former dissident and the founder of Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), in early 1990 framed this dream as having »our own chair and our own star in Europe«. Slovakia's efforts to join the EU were definitely motivated by two main concerns. First and foremost, it was the vision of better economic and living standards, and secondly Slovakia's desire to be a »normal« Europe-

an country (Haughton 2007) and to be »taken seriously« (Najšlová 2011). Since the 1998 elections the perception of the EU as a safe harbour has been gradually integrated into Slovakia's new national identity. Fico's foreign minister, Miroslav Lajčák, referred to this desire quite recently, saying that »there is no longer a need to become visible, but to discover our place« (Murray 2013). The international recognition and EU membership even now plays a major role and represents important motivation in Slovakia's current (the second half of 2016) Presidency of the Council of the EU.

#### 3.1 European Union in Parties' Discourse and Policies

Slovakia's foundation was initially perceived negatively by the international community due to its image as a nationalist and semi-democratic state after the split of the former Czechoslovakia, but since 1998 this changed. 'Europe' in Slovakia's political discourse has functioned as a synonym for doing something good and correct and the main political actors used this reference as an additional ingredient for legitimizing their political choices, and they continue to do so, even if the internalization of European values and policy paradigms at the domestic level is rather superficial as the recent mishandling of the EU migrant crisis indicate (Malová and Dolný 2016). In the Slovak political discourse, the EU was not replaced by any other authority that would be able to define a benchmark of correctness and rectitude. The EU maintained its leverage even after accession and was linked to feelings of national pride: it was, for example, the first Visegrad state that managed to join the Eurozone.

The popular and elite's attitude toward the EU produced the most important political consensus in formulating governments' policy goals and this guided also the process of transformation. However the EU's conditionality produced some negative political outcomes: e.g., the overuse of fast-tracking mechanisms raised a question about whether EU demands were actually harming rather than helping democratic consolidation, as the executive was strengthened at the expense of parliament. However, even this had undermined the legitimacy of the EU (Haughton and Malová 2007). Slovakia's performance in this regard can be characterized more by instances of under-compliance or reversal in highly-politicized areas such as the professionalization of the civil

services than by the de-consolidation of liberal democracy. Despite the European Commission's positive evaluation of Slovakia's compliance with EU legislation, often those laws are not fully implemented and enforced. In general, the rule of law and enforceability of rights has been still rather problematic given the state of the judiciary, so Slovakia belongs to the »world of dead letters« (Falkner and Treib 2008: 293). The weak enforcement or the reversal of EU legislation passed during the accession period varies.

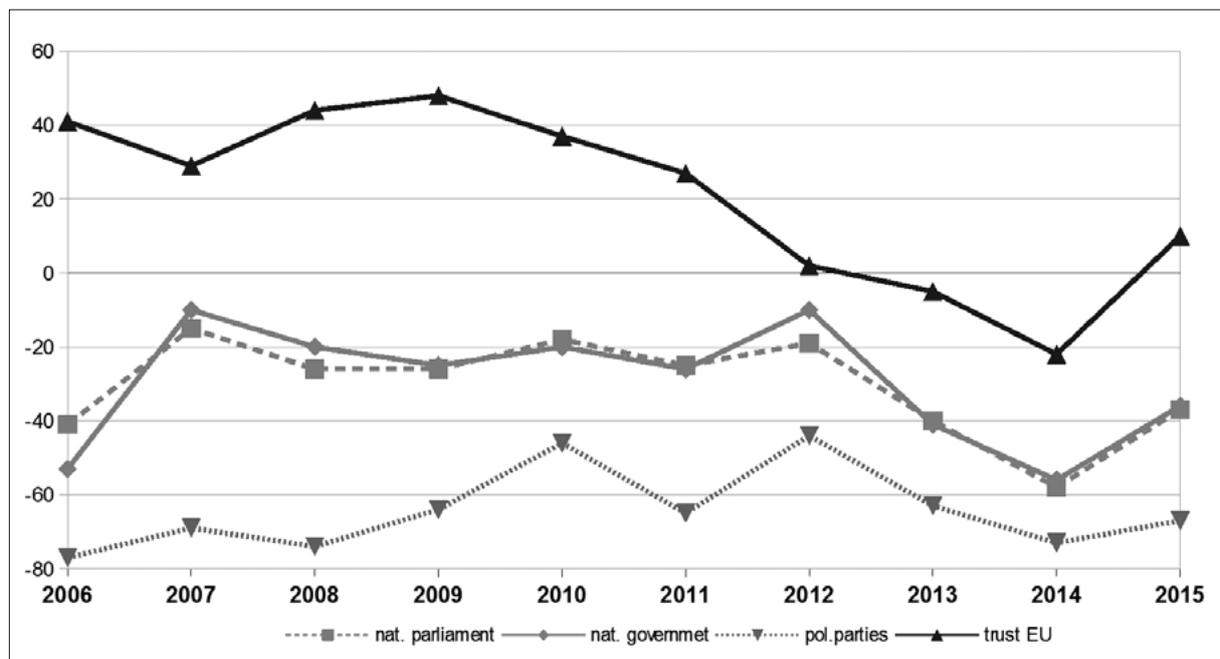
Despite these shortcomings the mainstream political elite aspired to raise Slovakia's status to that of the core member states. The way in which both the Radičová and the second Fico governments handled the economic crises, i.e. focusing on fulfilment of the Maastricht criteria as the way to get into the EU mainstream helped to maintain public support for the EU project and its legitimacy. However, these trends are not stable because the structure of party competition and parties are not institutionalized enough, as the March 2016 elections have confirmed and thus the EU's stabilizing role can be easily weakened if the mainstream political parties turn to a populist and paternalistic political style, portraying refugees and migrants as a security risk for Slovakia (Smer 2015). Such political discourse has promoted

fears among voters. This security focus is in line with the majority opinion of Slovak citizens; according to a 2015 survey, about 70 percent of citizens reject receiving refugees in Slovakia under the EU's proposed quota system and 63 percent consider refugees to be a security threat to Slovakia (Pravda 2015a) even if there are virtually no immigrants.

### 3.2 Public Support for the European Union and Domestic Institutions

Slovakia remains among countries where trust in the EU institutions has been continuously high, much higher than for domestic political institutions (see Figure 1). Corrupt behaviour by political parties has contributed to poor levels of governance. Deep and continuous distrust in domestic political institutions, namely political parties, can be explained by the parties' clientelism, regardless which parties were in government. During the transformation a vicious circle was established. The opposition confronts the government's failures with its own declared position of opposing corruption and supporting the public interest, honest and competent management of public resources but when a new government is formed, new corruption scandals have always emerged.

Figure 1: Net Trust in the European Union and in National Political Institutions in Slovakia 2006–2015



The fact that this strategy has worked in all elections and brought about alternation in power emphasises the sensitivity of this issue, and that the salience of corruption elevated levels of volatility in the 2012 election (Baboš and Malová 2013).

To conclude, for more than two decades the majority of Slovak citizens – despite many structural shortcomings, a painful transition to market economy and (liberal) democracy, a cheating and corrupt political elite – maintained high levels of trust in the EU that has served as a supranational anchor of Slovak democracy (Morlino 2005: 750-751). We suggest that the country's compliance with the EU's pre- and post-membership requirements has been determined by the logic of new nation-state building, i.e. efforts to »escape from invisibility« (Henderson 2002) and to gain »international recognition« (Bátora 2013). This EU »devoutness« on both the mass and elite levels of politics explains why the quality of democracy in Slovakia even during and shortly after the EU economic crises has remained stable over the last decade.

#### 4. Conclusions: Risks and Policy Implications

In the past, several factors limited liberal democracy in Slovakia and may limit it in the future. Firstly, compared to other Visegrad countries Slovakia is the most ethnically heterogeneous, as there are two relatively large ethnic minorities: Hungarians who comprise between 9 and 11 percent of the population and the Roma minority that could be up to 10 percent. This in turn often helps to promote nationalist feelings. Moreover, the EU migration crisis was misused by the mainstream political parties and in turn reinforced these nationalist emotions and even prompted right-wing extremism. Secondly, Slovak nationalism was one of the major issues linked with the end of the joint Czecho-Slovak state. Nationalism as ideology tends to favour a dominance of the nation over the rights of individuals; therefore there has always been a strong tendency toward majority rule. Thirdly, during and after transition the political elites have always strongly supported majority rule and this tendency was accepted by the majority; liberal »inclinations« of the elite and the public have been much weaker. During the last decades democratic norms in Slovakia have been often challenged by sharp conflicts over constitutional-

ism, separation of powers, rule of law, and individual rights, namely minority ones. Fourthly, Slovakia has an overwhelmingly conservative population given the role of the (Catholic) religion in society and the recent rise of pro-life movements. During the communist regime and shortly before its collapse the fight for religious freedom was one of the most appealing issues that mobilized mass anti-communist protest. In Slovakia all these four tendencies are closely intertwined; therefore the transformation was so difficult.

In general the transformation has produced a rather mixed political system in Slovakia, including a weakly institutionalized party system with elitist and personalized parties who have failed to establish strong and stable ties with (civil) society. Continuously high levels of corruption promote low levels of popular trust in national political institutions and democracy and recently the stabilizing role of the EU has been undermined. Neglecting the social dimension of transformation has also contributed to increasing disillusionment. Moreover, the mainstream political parties that have enjoyed a prominent role in shaping politics and policies in Slovakia have turned rather irresponsibly toward anti-migrant rhetoric and that has opened a Pandora's box of nationalism and extremism.

However, these shortcoming trends should not be exaggerated as the recent Eurobarometer survey (Spring 2016 edition) demonstrated that the general trust in the EU decreased but the proportion of those who tend not to trust is just 50 percent compared to 40 percent of those who trust the EU (10 percent said they did not know). This trend in Slovakia might not be stable, as Figure 1 indicates. The future depends on economic growth, increasing employment and improving social policies, as health care and social security are perceived as the most important problems. All this depends also on the parties' appeals, as political parties and leaders are always important opinion leaders. However, with the increasing influence of social networks in political communication, the situation is more vulnerable toward different information resources (many of them supported by Russia).

Given the central role of parties in democracies and the importance of their institutionalization for a democracy's accountability mechanisms and its responsiveness to voters, the quality of democracy depends heavily on



parties and the willingness of their leaders to moderate their behaviour and to solve conflicts according to the Constitution. This points us to an additional dimension of democratic consolidation, developed by Merkel (2008: 14): a representative one that concerns the territorial and functional representation of interests and which includes parties, party systems and organized interests. Since the removal of the communist regime, the weak institutionalization and low stability of individual parties has constantly challenged the consolidation of liberal democracy in Slovakia.

Slovakia has once (before the 1998 election) experienced the positive impact of external policy advice; however, now it is difficult to predict how this kind of intervention would be perceived. On the one hand, liberal ideas and forces have always been »pulling for the short end« in Slovakia, therefore any international support can easily discredit them. On the other hand, even the newly-created conservative movements such as the Alliance for Family are clearly supported from abroad but they do not seem to suffer from such support, as their con-

cerns are firmly rooted in the majority's religious values. Firstly, it can be useful to support youth and any non-governmental organizations with regional/local issues and targets. Secondly, it is also necessary to support NGOs seeking to improve the judiciary and enforcement of individual rights, because they are rather successful in their watchdog role. Thirdly, it would be useful to increase awareness of corporate responsibility of international companies (German and from other EU countries) in the most neglected regions and on social networks. Negative images of foreign Western companies have been promoted by Russian-sponsored propaganda.

The experience of Slovakia clearly indicates that in the post-communist context bread-and-butter issues may have priority, but neglecting pro-European and liberal education and promoting awareness of universal values can very easily backfire equally in the new and old democracies. The EU (including Germany) has to initiate new forms of political communication especially on social networks to balance the overweight of negative, anti-EU information and propaganda.



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### About the author

**Prof. Darina Malová, PhD** works at the Department of Political Science at Faculty of Arts of Comenius University since 1991. In 2007 she became a professor at the Department of Political Science. She received a number of international grants and scholarships, such as the Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence by IWU and the Karl W. Deutsch Guest Professorship by Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung in year 2005. Between 2007 and 2013 she held the chair of the Department of Political Science and since April 2013 she is the Vice Dean.

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Responsible:  
Matthias Jobelius, Head, Dept. for Central and Eastern Europe

Phone: +49-30-269-35-7726 | Fax: +49-30-269-35-9250  
<http://www.fes.de/international/moe>

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