

# Slovakia

**Peter Spáč**

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## 1. The Politics of populism in Slovakia

Populism as an ideology has emerged in many regions in the world, including Europe. This raises the question of whether certain features or conditions in regions or particular countries help this phenomenon to appear (and sustain itself), or whether its existence is independent of the context. If the former is true, then the region of Central and Eastern Europe has provided a solid basis for such political movements and parties (Stanley 2011: 258). Slovakia is no exception, and we can trace at least three factors supporting this insight.

First, after the fall of communism in 1989 Slovakia (until 1992 as part of Czechoslovakia) experienced major economic consequences. This was best seen when comparing Slovakia to its Czech counterpart over several indicators, particularly the level of unemployment (Holman 2000; Hilde 1999: 648). Slovaks were more sceptical than Czechs of radical economic liberalisation. These trends were later magnified by the privatisation of state property, a process beset by corruption (Jurzyca, Jakoby, Pažitný 1999: 405-408).

Secondly, Slovaks usually hold a rather negative opinion of domestic politics and its actors. Although this does not apply to the entire period of the last two decades, the trends here are quite obvious and are regularly supported by public opinion surveys (Bútorová, Gyárfášová, Velšic 1999: 244; Gyárfášová, Velšic 2002: 303). The third and final factor is the polarisation of the party system, which has led to the division of parties into two blocks. As for the distrust by Slovaks toward their politics, this feature has had a changing significance as well, reaching its peak in the late 90s during the last government of Vladimír Mečiar.

Separately or in combination, these three factors have created favourable conditions for the emergence of populism in Slovakia. As this chapter shows, the opportunity has been repeatedly exploited, and led to the creation of a number of political parties. For these parties,

populism became a primary or a secondary weapon in their struggle to gain public support, though with varying degrees of success.

## 2. The evolution of the party system

Since 1989 the party system of Slovakia has gone through many interesting developments. The preceding era of communist rule had a strong impact, as connections to earlier political movements and parties were effectively lost. As in other post-communist countries, the previous cleavages in society were blurred. The party system as such was thus re-constituted on new basis, mostly without significant historical connections to previous political actors.<sup>1</sup>

Added to the existing distrust by the society towards political parties based on the negative experience of communist one-party rule, this meant there were less than optimum conditions for a stable party system. Subsequent developments bore this out. Of all the parties that competed in the first free elections in 1990 only one, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), is still represented in the current parliament, whereas all other actors from this period lost their relevance or are balancing on the edge. This chapter introduces the evolution of the party system, and stresses its main features.

A usual feature of the collapsing communist countries was the emergence of a broad dissident movement. Slovakia was no exception, and during the revolutionary days of November 1989 the Public Against Violence (VPN) was created. This party had a very weak structure; it was composed of representatives of variety of ideologies. Although it clearly won the first elections in 1990 and entered both the national and federal governments, centrifugal trends were gaining strength, and in 1991 they finally led to the disintegration of the VPN.<sup>2</sup> Its main successor with the strongest influence on later Slovak politics was the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) led by Vladimír Mečiar.

Other elements of the party system were developing in the early 1990s as well. The former ruling communists transformed themselves into a moderate Party of the Democratic Left (SDE); their orthodox branch renewed its existence as a communist party but remained

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<sup>1</sup> One case was the Slovak National Party (SNS), which emerged in 1990 but claimed to be the direct successor of the eponymous party created in 1871. Despite the SNS's claim that it was the "oldest Slovak party" this alleged connection was more than doubtful for many reasons. (Kopeček 2007: 413-414)

<sup>2</sup> In its program the VPN proclaimed the goal aim of national independence. This goal became complicated with the start of discussions about the future configuration of Czechoslovakia. Ultimately the VPN was split over this issue. (Kopeček 2007: 139-140)

weak. Other parties were newly created, most importantly the Christian Democrats (KDH) and Nationalists (SNS). As about one tenth of the Slovak society is ethnic Hungarian, parties representing their interests emerged and began to cooperate.

A key feature with a strong impact was the last government led by Mečiar in 1994-1998, which led to a sharp polarization of the system. Against the parties comprising the government stood an ideologically heterogeneous opposition including the Hungarian parties. This tension reached its peak in the 1998 elections which ended Mečiar's rule and prevented the country from continuing down the road to illiberal democracy.

The easing of the polarization, accompanied by continuously falling public support for the HZDS, allowed the party system to become standardized in the ideological sense. The party Direction (Smer), established by former vice-chairman of the SDE Robert Fico, saw a rapid rise in support, and swallowed up the smaller leftist parties. Attempts on the right were also made, but with only limited success.<sup>3</sup> As a result the left part of the spectrum was clearly dominated by Smer, while the right remained fragmented and represented by numerous parties. This configuration continues to the present, and the last elections in 2012 confirmed it strongly.<sup>4</sup>

The Slovak party system has thus been stable in respect to the number of relevant parties, which has ranged from 5 to 7, but not with respect to its composition.<sup>5</sup> The system is still undergoing development, and even though most of the parties can be included in traditional party families their stability is an open question. The current shape of the party system resembles some of its past features, since Smer is a clearly dominant party which has assumed the role earlier held by the HZDS. The same applies to the polarization of the system. Although it had its peak during Mečiar's governments and decreased afterward, the rising strength of Smer re-polarized the scene. Before the elections 2010 all of the centre-right

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<sup>3</sup> This was the initial aim of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) led by Mikuláš Dzurinda which envisioned itself as a centre-right union inspired by the German CDU-CSU.

<sup>4</sup> In the last elections in 2012 Smer won a majority in parliament. The parties which composed the previous centre-right government led by Iveta Radičová lost their public support, and most of them are now hovering around the threshold needed to enter parliament.

<sup>5</sup> During the last two decades many new parties were created and tried to find their place in the system. Such were the cases of the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) and the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO) which survived only for a single term although they both managed to enter the government. More successful stories were the SDKÚ and Smer, whose chairmen both became prime ministers. The dynamics of the emergence of new actors has still not ended, as three of the current parliamentary parties, namely the right-wing liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), the Slovak-Hungarian project Bridge (Most), and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) were created in 2009 and 2011 respectively. On the other hand many of the parties which entered parliament were not able to hold their popular support and became marginalized. This counted for the above mentioned SOP or ANO but also for original actors like HZDS which in the 1990s clearly dominated the system.

parties openly pledged not to enter a government with Robert Fico and his party. Though there has been some movement in these relations and the parties are no longer divided into two strict blocks, the above-mentioned tension still exists and plays its role in Slovak politics.

### 3. Case selection

An overview of the existing literature on our topic brings the expected results: Slovakia provides an excellent ground for research as a post-communist country which has faced severe problems with the sustainability of quality of its democracy. As such its political development since 1989 has been thoroughly mapped (see Kopeček 2006; Kopeček 2007). On the other hand there is no vast amount of work specifically concentrating on populism in Slovakia, as this is a much narrower focus, and research on populism itself is still evolving. In this chapter some of the papers that have focused on this theme are presented. After that we select the cases which will be analyzed in the further text.

We start with the work of Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009), which can be presented as an overall study of populism in Slovakia, and so far the only one of its kind. The authors concentrated on the presence of populism in Slovak party system since 1990 and they mapped the usage of these appeals by all relevant parties. Their insight is both interesting and original, as they use the term “populism” as a scale and not as a strict binary choice (2009: 838).

A greater volume of work so far has been done on case studies focusing either on single parties or on smaller party groups. An important contributor to this kind of research has been Peter Učeň, who studied the then-new parties Smer and ANO labelled them as parties of “centrist populism” (2003). According to Učeň, these parties were reluctant or even refused to discuss their ideological affiliation, preferring criticize the elites, and call for easy and fast solutions based on common sense. Another case study was elaborated by Just (2007), who thoroughly described the creation and rise of SOP led by Rudolf Schuster, who later became President of Slovakia.

A wider study but one still dealing with a particular issue was a report on national populism edited by Petőcz (2009). The above-mentioned Učeň and another important Slovak scholar Grigorij Mesežnikov contributed to this book, the former providing a chapter on the concept of national populism, and the latter identifying the parties in Slovakia that fit into this

category. According to Mesežnikov these parties include the HZDS, SNS, and Smer, which share several common topics which they use to mobilize society.<sup>6</sup>

A somewhat different study was made by Stanley (2011) concerning Slovak parliamentary elections in 2010. The study focused not on parties as other authors have, but on ordinary citizens instead. Stanley discusses whether the usage of (national) populism among Slovak parties is equally reflected by the sentiment within Slovak society. In other words, whether Slovaks are attentive to such messages, and whether these affect their sympathies towards the various parties. As Stanley found out, populist appeals have only a limited influence on Slovak citizens, as socio-economic and national questions simply matter more.

Now we can move on to select cases for our analysis. Based on our overview of the literature, there are several Slovak parties which might be rounded up as the “usual suspects” when dealing with populism. Most notably this group includes parties which emerged shortly after 1989 such as the HZDS and SNS, as well as parties that were created in later years, e.g. Smer, SOP, and ANO. Our selection of cases mostly copies these findings, but not for all situations and time periods, as the text below discusses. This book distinguishes between indentitarian and partially populist parties, which we do not need to explain further as this was done in the first chapter. In this chapter we present those Slovak parties which we understand to have been populist at least for some periods of their existence, regardless of whether they fit into the former or latter subgroup.

What can be said is that we have not tracked any party that could be labelled as having been populist for the whole time of its existence.<sup>7</sup> As Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009: 832-836) correctly conclude, the populist appeals of the respected parties diminish after these parties enter parliament and most notably the government. This conclusion has a logical background: because we understand populism as primarily evoking antagonism between the people and elites, it becomes harder and harder for such parties to use this language after they become part of the establishment. The Slovak parties which can be classified as populist thus continued to meet the definition of populist mostly until their first or second elections; later they drew back on their populism and tried to form closer ties with other ideologies. This strategy proved common to all of the parties, though with a sharply different rate of success.

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<sup>6</sup> Mesežnikov implies that these topics include the definition of society, relations towards ethnic minorities, the interpretation of problematic issues of Slovak history, and the goal of awakening national consciousness. (Mesežnikov 2009)

<sup>7</sup> The only exemption here is OĽaNO, but this may be due to the very short existence of this party.

After these remarks we may proceed to the selection of our cases. As populist parties used in this chapter we will be working with six parties, namely the HZDS, ZRS, Smer, SOP, ANO and OĽaNO.<sup>8</sup> In accordance with the above discussion, in all cases we regard these parties to have been populist only for a limited time, which mostly ended shortly after their entry into parliament or government. All these parties shared a common topic, which initially was the division between the people and the elites; they stressed antagonism between these two groups, where the former represented the good guys and the latter the bad guys. The following chapters will elaborate these statements further.

For many authors this list may seem incomplete, as they would without a doubt add the SNS. On the contrary, this chapter will not classify the SNS as a populist party, but this requires an explanation. When dealing with national populism the SNS was clearly a party fitting this profile (Mesežnikov 2009: 41-42). The same counts for the analysis of Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009), which identified a sharp rise in populist appeals by this party after the 1998 elections.<sup>9</sup> Why do the conclusions in this chapter differ from those of the other scholars?

The main reason lies in usage of the term populism. If we understand populism mainly as an appeal distinguishing between two antagonistic groups, the people and the elite, the SNS just barely fits this profile. Though this party often speaks in the name of all Slovaks and understands Slovakia in ethnic terms, we identify this as a sign of its xenophobic character. Appeals pointing to ethnic Slovaks are thus the point that makes the SNS a radical nationalistic party and not a populist party. We are aware that this might in the strictest terms a disagreement with the other authors, but our point here is that the populism should be defined more narrowly, because otherwise nearly every party could be labelled as populist. In this respect, if praising ordinary Slovaks qualifies SNS as a populist party, than the same could be said of the Hungarian parties in Slovakia, as they appeal with a comparable message to their “target group”, and we could continue on this way ad absurdum.<sup>10</sup>

Our remark here is that if populism is primarily seen as an ideology which sets groups of people and the elite against one another, then the term it should be used carefully; otherwise we may end up with the classical situation in which our only tool is a hammer, and

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<sup>8</sup> This book works with a time frame ending in 2011, which would exclude OĽaNO. After consultations with the editors the party was included, and the chapter about Slovakia got a little exemption.

<sup>9</sup> For the electoral term 2002-2006 Deegan-Krause and Haughton even rank the SNS as the party with the highest ratio of populist appeals among all others. (Deegan-Krause, Haughton 2009: 832)

<sup>10</sup> Taken to the logical extreme, most parties have some groups in society which they aim at and shape their messages for. The parties of the right stress the importance of employers and entrepreneurs; Christian democrats do the same toward religious voters, etc. But based on these actions these parties are not labeled as populist, which is correct. The question is why nationalists should be regarded otherwise.

we see all problems as nails. This fully accounts for the supposed rise in the SNS's populism after 1998 when the SNS left the government due to internal problems which led to a temporary internal split, and its failure to get into parliament in 2002. The party reacted by becoming more radicalized, mostly towards Hungarians, Roma, and later the European Union.<sup>11</sup> One may see this change as a trend toward populism, but in fact these changes only strengthened the xenophobic and nationalistic features of the party. We thus consider the SNS to be a classical radical rightist formation, and do not include it on our list of populist parties.<sup>12</sup>

## 4. Analysis of selected cases

### 4.1. Histories of the populist parties

The political parties included in our analysis were formed at various times over the period after 1989. The first chronologically was the HZDS, which formed when it split away from the dissident forum Public Against Violence. The reason for the split was tension between the VPN leadership and Vladimir Mečiar, who became Slovak premier after the 1990 elections. The internal conflict came to a head with Mečiar's removal from executive office. The almost immediate reaction was the departure of his faction from the party, and the founding of the HZDS (Kopeček 2007: 132-135).

In the following years Mečiar's party became the dominant party in Slovakia by far, supported by more than a third of the electorate. However, the party was unable to maintain these levels in the long run, no doubt partly because of its problematic manner of governance, which went outside the bounds of liberal democracy in 1994-1998. In the latter half of the 1990s the party's public support steadily dwindled, and it went into the opposition in 1998. The Movement managed to get back into government in 2006, but only as a small coalition

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<sup>11</sup> There were many visible signs of radicalization within the SNS. One of the most famous was an episode when the leader of SNS Jan Slot urged a tank attack on Budapest, or when he vulgarly offended the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs. The party's program for 2006 elections was called "We are Slovaks. A Slovak government for Slovaks" which was aimed against the presence of the Hungarian party in the Dzurinda government.

<sup>12</sup> For the same reason the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) is not considered a populist party. Although it directs strong criticism toward the political establishment, this is because it is a dogmatic communist party and thus an anti-systemic element that aims to overthrow the current democratic regime. In this sense all anti-systemic parties would have to be regarded as populist, which would only further blur the concept of populism.

partner of Smer. The decline of HZDS became definitive in 2010 with its failure to get into parliament, and subsequent marginalization.<sup>13</sup>

The ZRS was born in a similar manner. Its main figure, Ján Ľupták, began in 1990 as an MP from the SDE, and represented a certain alternative to its main intellectual current. In 1992 Ľupták founded the civic organization ZRS<sup>14</sup>, which functioned independently from the SDE. After the SDE joined the coalition Moravčík government with some right-wing parties, the civic organization became a political party. The ZRS got into parliament after the 1994 elections and joined the government led by Mečiar. As it turned out, this move eventually led to the Ľupták party's downfall, as the actions of the government and in particular its privatization policy was in direct conflict with the party's election campaign goals. ZRS voters, who tended to come from the low-income social groups, left the party in droves. After the 1998 elections the ZRS suffered a sharp drop in support, and failed to win any seats in parliament. Ľupták tried to reverse this trend in subsequent years, but the party remained marginalized.

Three other parties, namely SOP, Smer, and ANO, were formed under qualitatively different circumstances. The problematic actions of the Mečiar government led to serious polarization on the political scene in the 1990s. As Kopeček tells us (2007: 143), the position of the HZDS was so predominant that the positions of all the other parties in the system were defined by their relationship to the Movement, or rather its chairman. Ideological considerations were secondary. It was this tension that produced dissatisfaction and then frustration among large segments of the public. This created room for the formation of new parties, the pioneer in this regard being the SOP (Učeň, Gyárfášová, Krivý 2005: 5-8).

The SOP was founded at the beginning of 1998 on the initiative of the popular mayor of Košice and one-time prominent communist functionary R. Schuster. This party was very critical of the existing political polarization, and set as its goal the achievement of civic unity, the idea of which was contained in its very name (Just 2007: 181-182). It managed to hang on to this ambition for a short time only, as the political situation forced it to choose between the two blocs. Months before the elections the SOP publicly declared itself part of the opposition, and in doing so gave up its position as a potential alternative for all. It thus lost its drawing power for a portion of its membership, and election results fell far short of expectations (Kopeček 2007: 273). Another problem for the SOP was the election of Rudolf Schuster as

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<sup>13</sup> In the election year 2012 the HZDS received less than one percent of the vote, which led to discussion of possibly dissolving the party.

<sup>14</sup> The name of the civic organization was the same as that of the later political party ZRS.



President of Slovakia, which deprived the party of its most prominent figure. As a part of the first Dzurinda government the party tried to redefine itself ideologically, but its proclaimed refocus on social and liberal values failed to halt its decline. After the 2002 elections it went into a tailspin<sup>15</sup> and ceased to be a relevant party.

Two parties with populist leanings were formed during the term of the first Dzurinda government in 1998-2002. The first was Smer, founded in 1999 by former SDL vice-chairman R. Fico.<sup>16</sup> Smer was sharply critical of the established parties, and based its main strategy on this negative stance. The second party was ANO, formed by media magnate Pavol Rusko, which like Smer was critical of the existing establishment, but somewhat less intensely so (Učeň 2003: 54-56). The two new parties were in a better position than the SOP had been. The climate after the fall of the Mečiar government continued to be very polarized, but there was no longer such massive pressure on new parties to commit themselves to one bloc or the other.

In the 2002 elections Smer and ANO succeeded in getting into parliament, and the latter party even joined the second Dzurinda government. Here, however, the trajectories of the two parties begin to diverge. While ANO lost voter support because of financial scandals involving its chairman, Smer was steadily building its position. The 2006 elections confirmed this trend. While ANO lost its seats in parliament and faded away, Smer came to dominate the center-left, and became the most powerful party in Slovakia. It remains so today; in the 2012 elections Smer won an absolute majority of seats in parliament, and formed a one-party government.

The final party we will introduce is OĽaNO. The party as such was founded in 2011, although its members ran for parliament as independents on the SaS ballot in the 2010 election.<sup>17</sup> After elections it became part of the Radičová government, even though they were not represent an independent member party, but operated under the SaS label, which produced a number of practical problems.<sup>18</sup> After the Radičová government lost its vote of confidence and was forced into early elections in June 2012, “Ordinary People” founded their own party

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<sup>15</sup> The SOP did not run by itself in the elections; its candidates ran on the SDL ballot. The result of this project, however, was just over one percent of the vote. (Bureau of Statistics SR)

<sup>16</sup> The founding of Smer to a certain degree recalls that of the ZRS: both parties grew out of the SDL.

<sup>17</sup> Specifically these were four candidates who were given the last four places on the ballot (numbers 147-150). They got into parliament due to preference votes, thanks to the strong media ties of their main figure Igor Matovič, who owns a network of regional periodicals. (Spáč 2010: 69) In those elections they ran under the heading of civic association Obyčajní ľudia [Ordinary People] (OL), and this became part of the name of the new political party.

<sup>18</sup> In practice the leading figure of the “Ordinary People” Igor Matovič spoke mainly for himself, which finally led to his expulsion from the SaS parliamentary club. This happened during the debate over the law on state citizenship, when Matovič refused to vote according to the governing coalition’s line.

OLaNO.<sup>19</sup> As its name implies, its declared goal is to create a platform for non-partisans, as the Slovak electoral system does not allow them to run independently. With a relatively diverse list of candidates OLaNO took part in the early elections and succeeded, becoming the second-strongest part after Smer. Since Smer has formed a single-party government, OLaNO is an opposition party at the moment.

## 4.2. Organizational structure and leadership style

One of the features of populism involves praising of the people. Knowing this it can be expected that parties that use populist messages will at least for the first years of their existence concentrate more on the communication with the electorate at the expense of building a strong organizational structure. In the case of the Slovak parties we are studying here, this presumption is for the most part confirmed. They may not precisely fit this identical organizational model, but a number of similar elements can be observed.

One of these is the party's approach to building internal structures. After their founding not one of them began immediately to build a broader party organization. The HZDS is a prime example: in the first years of its existence it had no codified principles of decision making or distribution of powers; its grass-roots organizations grew up spontaneously, and there was no formalized membership (Rybář 2011: 70). On the other hand Mečiar's party began to pick up a large number of members and its membership base continued to grow, until it was the largest party in Slovakia.<sup>20</sup> The ZRS started out on similar foundations. Its internal organization and operation were marked by inexperience and amateurism, but this was compensated for by strong growth in membership. Their base began to grow even before the founding of the ZRS as a party, while it was still a civic organization, and it continued to increase even after transforming into a political party. The ZRS reached its numerical zenith in 1995.<sup>21</sup>

Populist parties that were formed in earlier eras did not fully share these patterns. Although they did not actually avoid recruiting members, or deliberately restrict their numbers, this aspect of their organization was on a much lower level than with the HZDS or

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<sup>19</sup> There was an agreement between OĽ and SaS that the "Ordinaries" would not found their own party until the end of 2010.

<sup>20</sup> In 1993 the HZDS already listed 30 thousand members (Minarovič 2004: 54).

<sup>21</sup> When the civic association changed into a political party in March 1994 the ZRS had more than 13 000 members. By 1995 membership had risen to around 20 thousand (Kopeček 2007: 223-224).

ZRS.<sup>22</sup> As for their organizational structure itself, the SOP gradually created a structural model for the whole party (Ondruchová 2000: 29). In contrast, Smer and ANO emphasized a rather different set of priorities. These two entities concentrated on forming narrow, professionally-operated structures that proved efficient and successful in running election campaigns. In effect Smer and ANO based their organization on managerial principles.<sup>23</sup> This model was taken furthest by Smer, which unlike SOP and ANO almost completely bypassed the building of regional structures at the beginning. In 2001 this party, almost two years after its founding, replaced its regional management offices with traditional regional organizations, and began to establish networks in the districts (Kopeček 2007: 286). But not until recent years has Smer become more generally institutionalized.

A key point that all Slovak populist parties have in common was a major degree of centralization, low levels of internal party democracy, and a prominent role for party leaders.<sup>24</sup> The strong positions of the chairman derived from the fact that they were all among the groups' founders. The cases of Smer and ANO were prime examples, says Učeň (2003: 55), according to whom these parties were basically an act of will by their chairmen. This was surely true for the HZDS, ZRS, and SOP as well. Perhaps the most visible example in this sense was Pavol Rusko who headed ANO: as the owner of various media outlets was not only the party's founder, but its nearly exclusive funder as well. He was almost literally the owner of the party.

Another strength of the chairmen of these populist parties is their longevity (tab. 1). ZRS and Smer both long had or still have had only one chairman, and the HZDS was even more extreme in this regard. Vladimír Mečiar announced he would step down after the 2012 elections, but this only happened after the party's definitive marginalization. During the era that the movement was a relevant force, and for many years after, Mečiar's position was

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<sup>22</sup> The SOP and ANO reached their peak numbers at around 6 thousand. At present the voter base of Smer is one of Slovakia's largest at over 15 thousand members. These numbers were built up over a longer the course of time: contributing factors included the gradual strengthening of the party's position, and the attrition process among the smaller center-left parties. Smer's original reluctance to take on a larger number of members was shown by the fact that in 2000 it had only around 3 thousand members (Mesežnikov 2003: 82; Kopeček 2007: 286; „Kongres SOP...“, Sme, 28.6.1999).

<sup>23</sup> In the context of the financial background that ANO's chairman provided it, the party from an organizational standpoint was in effect something between a political party and a private firm (Rybář 2011: 18).

<sup>24</sup> In Slovak politics centralization is not limited to the populist parties. One strong factor determining this was the introduction of a single country-wide electoral district in 1998, which impacted the other parties as well. One example was the SDKÚ and its choice of candidates, which was officially strongly inclusive, but the deciding role in the process was kept by the party leadership (Spáč 2012).

unchallenged.<sup>25</sup> There was a change in the chairmanship of the SOP, when in 1999 Rudolf Schuster was replaced by Pavol Hamžík, but this change was necessitated by Schuster's election as President of Slovakia, an office which is traditionally non-partisan. Likewise, in 2007 Pavol Rusko was replaced at the head of ANO by Robert Nemcics, but again this was at a time when the party had declined into irrelevancy. In the practice of the individual parties, the institution of electing a chairman was a non-conflict confirmation of the chairman in his position.<sup>26</sup>

**Table 1.** Party chairmen

| Political party | Name            | Term in office |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| HZDS            | Vladimír Mečiar | 1991 – 2012    |
| ZRS             | Ján Ľupták      | 1994 – 2012    |
| SOP             | Rudolf Schuster | 1998 – 1999    |
|                 | Pavol Hamžík    | 1999 – 2003    |
| Smer            | Robert Fico     | 1999 – 2012    |
| ANO             | Pavol Rusko     | 2001 – 2007    |
|                 | Robert Nemcics  | 2007 – 2011    |
| OLaNO           | Igor Matovič    | 2009 – 2012    |

The Slovak populist parties took differing approaches to organizational matters. From the beginning the HZDS and ZRS concentrated more on growing their member base, leaving their structures less organized, while SOP, Smer, and ANO on the other hand made relatively little effort to increase membership. While the SOP maintained an almost traditional organization, Smer and ANO were aiming, at least at first, to construct a narrow but effective framework for winning elections. For objective reasons the process of institutionalization advanced furthest with HZDS and Smer, while the other parties lost motivation after losing elections. With the HZDS there was a marked tendency towards the formation of clientelist networks outside the formal party structure, but when the party went into opposition in 1998 this trend was halted and eventually negated.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Among the democratic countries Vladimír Mečiar may have been the party chairman with the longest uninterrupted term as party head. This is not fully verifiable, however, given the limited information coming out of some of the Asian or African countries.

<sup>26</sup> Elections for party chairmen often featured a lack of opposing candidates, which was typical for the HZDS for example. Likewise election procedures could be designed to help the favored candidate, as with ANO which used public voting (Kopeček 2007: 404-405).

<sup>27</sup> In the 1990s the HZDS as the ruling party created a sort of political support network, made up of associated organizations for young people or women. The party also initiated special-interest groups that worked in its favor, such as business, journalistic, or community associations (Kopeček 2007: 161-162; Rybář 2011: 70-71).

In this chapter we have not yet mentioned OĽaNO. This party is a special case that differs from any of the other parties in the chapter, or any other political party for that matter. In reality OĽaNO lacks any organizational structure, and since it was founded it has shown no ambition to become a classic party. This entity continues to present itself almost as a civic association, making it more attractive for independent candidates to run on its ballot. The only fixed point of party leader Igor Matovič, whose dominant position is comparable to that of the other populist parties' leaders. It is impossible to say whether OĽaNO will finally begin building a broader internal structure, or will remain in its current amorphous shape. At the moment the latter seems more likely, but if the party ever becomes part of a coalition government it may be tempted to modify that.

### 4.3. Ideology

This publication distinguishes between two types of populist parties. The first are identitarian populist parties, parties for which ideas are only the backdrop, and populist messages predominate. The second type is the partially populist party, a party that can still be placed into a specific party family, and for which populism is an accessory. Therefore, in defining whether a party is populist or not, we must take ideology into account. The Slovak case gives us a number of interesting examples.

Of the parties we are analyzing, the HZDS was the first to be founded. Mečiar's party was formed in 1991, and from the beginning it relied on strongly populist rhetoric. Their perspective was critical of existing elites who had failed to comprehend the needs of "ordinary" Slovaks. The HZDS drove home this point especially in the context of an economic transformation undertaken by the establishment without proper attention to the needs of the public. These arguments were accompanied to a great degree by nationalistic and socially-laden rhetoric (Kopeček 2007: 158).

In the case of the HZDS the exploitation and exacerbation of antagonisms between the people and the elites took on a rather unusual form. The reason was simple: the HZDS itself was part of the elite. Even before the party was founded, many of its officials were part of the political leadership in the regions, and Mečiar himself was Premier until the spring of 1991. Even so, the HZDS used its populist message effectively during its time in the

opposition in the early 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Paradoxically, it was able to do so not only during the initial period from its founding up until the 1992 elections, but even afterward during the time of the Moravčík government in 1994. By then HZDS had experienced a convincing electoral victory, a dominating two-year stint in the government, and was totally identified with what was happening at the time<sup>29</sup>, even so it continued to successfully present itself as an outsider party (Deegan-Krause, Haughton 2009: 830). Its next term in government in 1994-1998 finally exhausted this vein and the HZDS ceased to fall under our definition of populism as it was now clearly perceived as an "insider" of the system.

What type of populist party was the HZDS at that time? Mečiar's party originally refused to categorize itself ideologically, which was a reflection of its internal heterogeneity.<sup>30</sup> The program orientation of the party was vague and ambivalent, which meant in practice that the HZDS played on various themes, but carefully and without being too contentious or defining itself too much.<sup>31</sup> In 2000 the Movement proclaimed itself to be center-right, but in reality there was no change (Kopeček 2007: 178-179). About the HZDS in the period 1991-1994 we can safely say that it was ideologically unclassifiable, which places it close to the group of identitarian populist parties. On the other hand, the HZDS's populist issues went alongside a number of various other ideological elements. The HZDS was thus closer in its early days to identitarian populism, but this conclusion remains somewhat qualified.<sup>32</sup>

The ZRS on the other hand is a relatively simple case. This party, continuing from its previous activities as a civic association, defined itself as a far-left party appealing to the socially disadvantaged and threatened groups.<sup>33</sup> Its central themes were economic, such as the transition to the market economy or the privatization of state property. Into this message the ZRS succeeded in introducing clearly populist themes. It defined itself as a politically and morally clean party with the goal of unifying the broader segments of society. The existing

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<sup>28</sup> A typical example was the failure of talks between Czech and Slovak officials over the shape of the Czechoslovak federation during the first half of 1992. In this situation the HZDS became the party of the "deceived people" and leveled its criticism at the entire existing establishment (Leško 1996: 75).

<sup>29</sup> After the breakup of the federation the HZDS began to tout itself as the founding party of the state and the standard-bearer of the era. Mečiar himself was presented as the "Father of his Country".

<sup>30</sup> This heterogeneity was the logical outcome of the way the HZDS was founded, in that it did not split off from the VPN primarily on the basis of ideas ideology. Contrast this with Václav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which as the main successor of the dissident movement Civic Forum (OF) was founded as a clearly right-wing party.

<sup>31</sup> The ambiguous character of the HZDS manifested itself in a number of ways. For example the movement styled itself as having helped bring down the communist regime, but at the same time it was opposed to lustration laws. Likewise Mečiar's party proclaimed Christian values, but never slipped towards hard conservative Catholic positions (Kopeček 2007: 159-160).

<sup>32</sup> To a certain degree the HZDS might be classified as a partially populist party during these years, but it is impossible to determine what "traditional" ideology it actually had.

<sup>33</sup> It was the ZRS's own self-presentation as the party farthest left on the political spectrum except for the Slovak communists.

establishment was accused by the party of being egoistic and placing its own goals above the general national and civic interest (ZRS Election Program 1994).

From the beginning Ľupták's party poised itself to exploit the tension between society and the elites, with society being seen as morally good, the elites as a stratum that had betrayed its trust. The ZRS emphasized the point by identifying itself with the general protest against the developments taking place at the time.<sup>34</sup> As in the case of the HZDS, their participation in the coalition government in 1994-1998 was a fundamental turning point. When the ZRS became part of the establishment, it lost this issue for the future. Although they did not abandon the theme entirely (Kopeček 2007: 232), it was no longer able to keep from becoming marginalized. In the end Ľupták's party, including its previous activities as a civic organization, at least at the beginning fit the definition of a partially populist entity with a primarily far-left orientation.

Political conditions in Slovakia resulting from developments in the 1990s were also strongly reflected in the appearance and activities of populist parties that were formed later. The polarization of the party spectrum between two blocks (pro-Mečiar and anti-Mečiar) also impacted the mood of society at the time. The level of tension was so high that a large part of the public viewed it as a negative factor, and were willing to consider various alternatives. This freed up a large segment of the voting population, to whom the emerging new populist parties purposefully reached out (Učeň et al. 2005: 17).

The first of these new parties was SOP. At the beginning this party founded by Rudolf Schuster lacked a clear ideological profile. Instead it put all its energy into criticizing the existing conditions: the polarization of society, ever-present social hatred, and the inability of the two blocs to come to agreement.<sup>35</sup> The SOP saw these two factors as a negative influence on society, which instead stood in need of unity and reconciliation. In this way the SOP justified the reasons for its founding as a reaction to society's need to end this state of affairs, and this was emphasized in the party's choice of name (Mesežnikov 1999: 92-93).<sup>36</sup> The SOP's populism lasted only a short time, however. Circumstances forced the party into the opposition bloc, which rendered the fundamental attributes that distinguished it from the other parties less pronounced. Its participation in the coalition government and the departure of

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<sup>34</sup> The ZRS specifically called in its election program for voters to choose it as an expression of protest against the economic, political, and moral changes than taking place (Volebný program ZRS 1994)

<sup>35</sup> Slovakia's effort to elect a president was reflective of the period. Originally the Slovak head of state was elected by parliament; a constitutional three-fifths majority was necessary. But in 1997-1998 none of the party blocs possessed this kind of majority, which led to a stalemate. As a result, after the end of M. Kovač's term in office Slovakia went almost a year without a president.

<sup>36</sup> The SOP described the tension within the party system as "senseless" and "artificial" (Volebný program SOP 1998).

Rudolf Schuster as party head led the party to move towards more social and liberal values, but without a more precise ideological grounding (Kopeček 2007: 278).

The party ANO was a different case: from the beginning it defined itself as a center-right liberal party. This was the primary basis for its program oriented towards economic issues, which called for a diminished role for the state in society. Even so, ANO resorted to clearly populist messages. The party accused the existing establishment of corruption and strong ties to the business sector. Moreover, according to ANO there was an ever-widening gap between the elites and people, overseen by politicians who were incapable of or uninterested in allowing people to live their own lives as they see fit (Učeň 2003: 54-55). Thus ANO's populism was not actually very radical, and when the party entered Dzurinda's second government these arguments were muffled. Instead, the party decided to focus more on its liberal identity, even on questions civilizational issues, which brought it into frequent conflict with its coalition partners the KDH.<sup>37</sup>

The last of the three populist parties created in 1998-2002 was Smer. When it was founded this party rejected any classification on the left-right scale, and defined itself as non-ideological (Mesežnikov 2000: 119). Instead, Smer was strongly critical of both party blocs, and the entire establishment. It did not view the prevailing polarization through the same lens as SOP, but it did blame both sides in the conflict, accusing them of failure and of having lost the right to lead the country and society in the future. Smer's antagonism towards the mainstream was perhaps best illustrated by the slogan "as they stole under Mečiar, so they steal under Dzurinda" (Wienk, Majchrák 2003: 168). This bon mot should be seen not in the personal context but in the broader sense. Here Vladimír Mečiar and Mikuláš Dzurinda do not appear as individual persons, but as symbols of the era "before Smer", which R. Fica's party criticized as a whole. The gap between the people and the elites was so large, according to Smer, that it could only be resolved by replacing the entire current generation of politicians.

Smer's populism differed in intensity and range from that of SOP and ANO. As Učeň (2003: 56) observes, ANO made relatively selective use of these appeals, but with Smer the populism was applied across the board. After the 2002 elections, however, there were changes even changes in the case of Smer. Shortly prior to elections the party talked about following the so-called "Third Way", but this failed to have the desired effect. Its poorer-than-expected election showing led the party to abandon its non-ideological stance and openly espouse the

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<sup>37</sup> Between ANO and KDH there were sharp conflicts over the nature and character of the state. In these conflicts ANO represented the secular view. Typical arguments were over the issue of abortion, or the so-called Vatican accord.



principles of social democracy. Smer continued to further solidify this ideological stance, which placed it in a better position to criticize the right-wing economic reforms of the second Dzurinda government (Kopeček 2007: 298-300). At the same time it toned down its populist rhetoric, and finally entered the government in 2006.<sup>38</sup>

From the above information we can rank SOP and Smer among the identitarian populist parties, while ANO with its liberalism belongs among the partially populist parties. With all three of these parties the populism lasted for a limited time only. The populism of SOP and ANO pretty much ended with the first parliamentary elections; the SOP's populist appeal weakened even before the elections, under the necessity of lining up with the anti-Mečiar bloc. Smer, on the other hand, had the "advantage" of not getting into the government after the first elections, but remaining in the opposition, which allowed it to maintain its populism for a longer time.<sup>39</sup> But this, too, was ended when it entered the government as the winner of the next elections.

The last case we will analyze is OĽaNO. In this case any clear ideological definition is by nature problematic, as the party seeks to serve as a platform for non-partisans of various ideological backgrounds. The party's program for the 2012 elections does not provide us any more precise guidance, as there is no visible tilt in one direction or the other (see OĽaNO Electoral Program 2012). Although OĽaNO does not reject the right-left categorization as vehemently as some of the above parties, it remains for the time being an ideologically-amorphous entity.<sup>40</sup>

However, the populist element in the OĽaNO has been important from the beginning. In accordance with its name the party assumed the role of representative and defender of ordinary people, and took a strongly critical attitude towards the political establishment. The party drew on the frustration of people who have long felt themselves robbed by politicians and the elites, those symbols of corruption and clientelism (Election Program OĽaNO 2012). This aspect was displayed during the 2012 election campaign, when the OĽaNO pointed to media reports of clientelistic ties of political elites to certain financial groups, and placed this

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<sup>38</sup> The classification of Smer as a social democratic party is not without reservation. The party has long projected nationalist messages as well, and this was clearly reflected in the way they governed during 2006-201. Moreover, this helped Smer to gradually absorb a big share of former SNS voters.

<sup>39</sup> In the period after the 2002 elections until the elections in 2006 Smer can be seen as gradually moving towards becoming a partially populist party, mainly by presenting itself as a social democratic party.

<sup>40</sup> One possibility might be to note the candidacies of the leading OĽaNO representatives on the ballots of the liberal SaS in 2010. However, they are not as ideologically close as they may seem given the campaign program of the "ordinaries" along with the statement by chairman Matovič who denied being a liberal.

in the context of its call for a new generation of politicians.<sup>41</sup> Overall OĽaNO can be safely classified as an identitarian populist party, while the future remains quite open in this regard.

From the standpoint of ideology, we can point out a number of interesting features among the Slovak populist parties. Most of these parties are, or have been, identitarian populist parties and not the partial type. The point they shared in common, with the logical exception of OĽaNO, is the transitory nature of these parties' populism, which usually (though not always) ended with the party's first elections. Last but not least, because of the closeness of these parties' ideologies, we can speak of at least two waves of Slovak populism. The first is represented by ZRS and HZDS; their messages were aimed at citizens who lost out in the post-1989 economic transformation. The second wave, started by SOP and continued by Smer and ANO, drew on the exhaustion and frustration among parts of society with developments in the post-communist era, which the existing polarization of the party spectrum only exacerbated. In this context it is a question whether OĽaNO falls under the second wave, or forms the foundation for a new trend, or whether it represents something of a divergent case.

#### 4.4. Electoral support and the social base

This chapter will provide basic information on the election results of the Slovak populist parties, and the character of their supporters. Two observations at the outset: because the individual parties maintained the populist profile for a limited time, key for us is the information that corresponds to the particular era. The second point is of an entirely practical nature and concerns OĽaNO. This party was formed only recently, and took part in its first parliamentary elections in March 2012. These circumstances of time limit the amount of available information about OĽaNO and its voters.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Specifically the so-called Gorilla affair, involving the publication of conversations indicating widespread corruption and influence by financial interests on domestic politics.

<sup>42</sup> The individual parliamentary elections in Slovakia are regularly mapped in detail and published by the Institute for Public Affairs. This text was written only a few months after the 2012 election; therefore the 2012 data is lacking. For information on OĽaNO and its voter support we will be able to consult this publication after it comes out..

**Table 2.** Election results for the analyzed parties

| Political party | 1992  |       | 1994  |       | 1998 |       | 2002  |       | 2006  |       | 2010  |       | 2012  |       |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                 | %     | seats | %     | seats | %    | seats | %     | seats | %     | seats | %     | seats | %     | seats |
| HZDS            | 37,26 | 74    | 34,96 | 61    | 27   | 43    | 19,5  | 36    | 8,79  | 15    | 4,32  | -     | 0,93  | -     |
| ZRS             | -     | -     | 7,34  | 13    | 1,3  | -     | 0,54  | -     | 0,29  | -     | 0,24  | -     | 0,72  | -     |
| SOP             | -     | -     | -     | -     | 8,01 | 13    | 1,36  | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     |
| Smer            | -     | -     | -     | -     | -    | -     | 13,46 | 25    | 29,14 | 50    | 34,79 | 62    | 44,41 | 83    |
| ANO             | -     | -     | -     | -     | -    | -     | 8,01  | 15    | 1,42  | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     |
| OLaNO           | -     | -     | -     | -     | -    | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | 8,55  | 16    |

Note: In 2002 the SOP did not campaign independently, but its candidates ran on the SDE ballot. The same was done by ZRS in 2012 when it ran on the KSS ballot.

Source: Slovak Bureau of Statistics.

The above information (tab. 2) shows the results our parties achieved in the individual elections. From this data it is possible to observe the paths of the populist parties through parliament. While the HZDS was a clear victor after its first elections, the others were not quite so successful. Besides Smer, which achieved a decent result, though below expectations, the other parties became minor actors with returns up to ten percent. But their position was very fragile, as their subsequent election losses proved.

Another important point is a closer analysis of the individual parties' support. The two parties established at the beginning of the 1990s, the HZDS and the ZRS, aimed their messages primarily at the social groups that suffered most during the transformation process after 1989. This was exhibited especially by the ZRS. Its electorate was made up mostly of working people and the unemployed, while students and businessmen were represented to a lesser degree. This corresponded to the educational profile of ZRS supporters, with trade school education predominating, and minimal support from university graduates. The peripheral profile of the party<sup>43</sup> was also illustrated from a geographic standpoint; predictably, party support grew the greater the distance east of Bratislava (Kopeček 2007: 225).

In the case of the HZDS the situation was different; at first its voters matched remarkably well the average vital statistics of Slovak society. This can be explained by the HZDS's heterogeneous character, which differed greatly from the relatively narrowly-focused ZRS. The early support for Mečiar's party was centered in the villages and smaller towns, in areas with higher proportions of Catholics, and likewise people with less education. Soon, however, this broad profile narrowed significantly: these changes were quite apparent in the data from the 1998 elections. The HZDS as a party began to take on a markedly rural

<sup>43</sup> The ZRS was the only one of the relevant parties not to make its headquarters in Bratislava, but in central Slovakia in the town of Banská Bystrica.

character, with strong support among older voters and people with less education (Krivý 1999). Geographically the party's support was stable over time, concentrated in the northern and northwest parts of Slovakia, and came to gradually include some eastern regions as well. A few changes took place in later years, but these were part of the HZDS's decline (Madleňák 2012: 74-78).

The trio of parties SOP, Smer, and ANO were formed at a different time and aimed at other groups of voters. The focus of their interest was not the "losers" of the transformation, but social segments dissatisfied with the long-term direction of the country and political polarization (Učeň, Gyárfášová, Krivý 2005: 18). The result was that although their voter's demography was not completely amorphous, still in many respects they diverged little from the statistical norms, and did not range towards the extreme values. A shared trait among these parties was their ability to appeal to younger categories of voters and first-time voters. This was true for the SOP in 1998, and for Smer and ANO in 2002. Their support did not have any significant religious component, although in the case of SOP and ANO there was a minor tendency to lose Catholic voters. At the same time all three parties gained greater support in larger cities (Krivý 1999: 53-55; Krivý 2003: 89-90; Gyárfášová 2011: 76-78, 86-88; Madleňák 2012: 62-63).

On the other hand, in terms of geographical support the political groups differ. The chairman of the SOP was from eastern Slovakia, where the party drew its earliest; like the ZRS, it was somewhat a party of the periphery.<sup>44</sup> ANO was also rooted geographically in central and eastern Slovakia, but its support was not as concentrated as the SOP's. Smer's support in its first elections came mostly from the western and central parts of the country (Slovak Bureau of Statistics).

In their first elections the voter bases of SOP, Smer, and ANO shared a number of attributes in common despite their differing geographical distribution. With all of the above parties, it was the shallow loyalty of their supporters, especially in the case of the SOP, which was behind disappointing election results and declining support in the polls. The parties did manage to get into parliament, but their position was uncertain; the SOP and ANO would suffer the consequences from this in subsequent elections. On the other hand Smer as an opposition party aimed for the center-left, and took a strongly critical stance towards the second Dzurinda government; which brought it greater support in the polls. This led to a major shift in the nature of the party's support; this was partly a result of voters leaving the

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<sup>44</sup> In the Košice districts, which make up nearly seven percent of Slovakia's population, the SOP gained nearly 20 percent of the vote (Slovak Bureau of Statistics).

declining HZDS as well. While Smer went explicitly after first-time voters from the big cities in 2002, they changed their focus soon afterward. With the influx of former HZDS voters Smer's electoral base became older, and became well-established in smaller communities (Gyárfášová 2011: 91). Unlike the HZDS, however, Smer continued to enjoy significant support from the other voter segments as well.<sup>45</sup>

As for OĽaNO, at present we can only make a few general observations. The geographic distribution of their support during the 2012 elections showed nothing specific; on the contrary, its electoral support was quite evenly distributed (Štatistický úrad SR). The one exception in this regard were areas with a larger share of the Hungarian minority, but this has been true of all the "non-Hungarian" populist parties. From the [social standpoint], there are several indicators that OĽaNO has especially taken center-right voters away from the established parties.<sup>46</sup> This might make it more attractive to younger people with middle and high levels of education and from bigger towns. This theory requires some more examination, however, and the question remains open for the time being.

Election results show that the individual Slovak populist parties enjoyed varying degrees of success in this regard. The fact that they appeared on the scene in two separate waves is reflected in the social background of their electorates. While in their first elections the ZRS and HZDS were supported by the economically weaker strata, the supporters of the second wave displayed different characteristics. Especially with the parties we have classified as identitarian populist, at the beginning their voters did not diverge significantly from the social averages. During in a later period the HZDS electorate became more narrowly concentrated, while Smer's voting base changed from its original characteristics altogether; but this is no longer relevant for our purposes, as these aspects go beyond the bounds of our topic, which concerns the two parties populist stages.

#### 4.5. Position in the political system

The last set of topics to be discussed is the position of the populist parties within the framework of the political system. As indicated by the election results shown above, these parties were able to win relevant political support which allowed them to get into parliament. The question is how they dealt with their newfound status.

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<sup>45</sup> Smer's overwhelming victory in the 2012 elections has led it to re-focus on the less-contentious elements among its voter base.

<sup>46</sup> According to polls taken in February 2012 shortly before the elections, 20 percent of former SaS voters, and almost 15 % of SDKÚ voters, were willing to vote for OĽaNO. (Prieskum agentúry Polis 2012)

Probably the most important indicator of the success of a political party in general is its ability to gain and hold on to power. Under parliamentary democracies this means becoming part of the executive. The political trajectory of the Slovak populist parties has been impressive in this regard. Of the six formations analyzed here, four got into the government after their first elections: the HZDS, ZRS, SOP, and ANO. Mečiar's party is something of a special case, as its top officials including their chairmen had held the highest offices previously. Smer won a place in the government after its second elections in 2006. The only one of these parties that has not served in government is OĽaNO (tab. 3).

Our effort to reveal and distinguish among the patterns of behavior by the Slovak populist parties both in and out of government is problematic for two reasons. The first is that these parties soon abandoned their populist stances, and turned to other messages to accomplish their goals. Typically there was an effort to either strengthen or re-define their ideological profile, as in the case of ANO or SOP. The second reason is the very short lifespan of these parties, half of which were unable to maintain relevance for more than one term. After joining coalition governments the parties we have analyzed toned down their populist rhetoric, which means that their later activities (in or out of parliament) fall outside their populist stages.

Table 3. Populist parties and their participation in coalition governments

| Political party | Year of founding | Entered government | Number of elections before first joining government |
|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|---|
| HZDS            | 1991             | 1992               | 1   |
| ZRS             | 1994             | 1994               | 1   |
| SOP             | 1998             | 1998               | 1   |
| Smer            | 1999             | 2006               | 2   |
| ANO             | 2001             | 2002               | 1   |
| OĽaNO           | 2011             | -                  | -   |

Note: The last column indicates the number of parliamentary elections the party ran in before joining a government.

The rapid rise of the Slovak populist parties indicates that these entities enjoyed high coalition potential, and often found themselves in the position of the kingmakers. Both the ZRS and ANO became necessary links in the formation of a minimal winning coalition after

the 1994 and 2002 elections.<sup>47</sup> The case of the SOP was a bit different: while the first Dzurinda government would have been viable without it, the promised constitutional changes required a minimum of 90 coalition MP's to pass, making it necessary to include Schuster's party. The presence of ANO was one reason Smer did not join the government after its first election. Robert Fico had made clear his ambition to do so during the election campaign (Mesežnikov 2002: 86-87), but with the chance to form a homogeneous center-right government his party became superfluous to building the coalition.

Meanwhile, the Slovak populist parties were not only the object of interest coalition-building interest; they also undertook their own initiative in this regard. We could say that despite the varying degrees of antagonism harbored towards the existing establishment when the parties were first starting out, they all proved willing to adapt to the new situation that typically occurred after their first election success. The SOP took this step already during the election campaign of 1998, when circumstances forced it into the opposition camp. As Učeň observes (2003: 55), the weaker anti-elitist element in ANO compared to that of Smer before the 2002 elections helped Rusko's party get into the government. Probably the most spectacular display of adaptability to changing conditions was the ZRS, which originally planned to remain in the opposition and had been strong critic of the government (Kopeček 2007: 226). Instead the ZRS joined Mečiar's government, and apart from a few occasions became a loyal partner of the HZDS.

Relations with other political parties are an important factor of a party's position in the political system. In this sense the Slovak populist parties differed little from the established actors, and after making it into parliament and the government they fell in line with the existing mechanism. As the political spectrum became increasingly polarized, the ZRS clearly attached itself to the pro-Mečiar bloc. Later on the SOP and ANO did something similar, but with diametrically opposite results. On the other hand Smer resisted this logic at first, and its ideology and bitter criticism of the second Dzurinda government led to mostly negative relations with the center-right parties. Working from the same principle at present is OĽaNO, which came out against Fico's cabinet, but is keeping its distance from the parliamentary opposition.

In other words, the Slovak populist parties made it into the political system, but found it difficult to stay there. ZRS, SOP, and ANO failed to win re-election to parliament, and this

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<sup>47</sup> An absolute majority in the Slovak parliament is 76 (out of 150 seats). In 1994-98 Mečiar's government had 83 seats, of which the ZRS contributed 13. Similarly the second Dzurinda government (2002-2006) as a minimum victorious coalition had 78 seats to start with, of which 15 belonged to ANO.

presaged their downfall. It is symptomatic that in every case these were parties that entered the government after their very first elections (Deegan-Krause, Haughton 2009: 837-838).<sup>48</sup> Smer was different, remaining in the opposition until 2006, which allowed them to better-time their ideological shift. These observations should indicate the options open to the youngest and currently only populist party, OĽaNO. This party, like the previous three, entered parliament as a minor player, but like Smer it has remained in the opposition. Even if we overlook its special status as a platform for independent figures, it is possible that future survival will depend on its ability to move toward a firmer set of values, and gain loyalty from a specific segment of the voters.

## 5. Conclusion

Political developments in Slovakia after 1989 created a favorable setting for the emergence of populist parties. A marked degree of mistrust by the public toward the political elites, aggravated by a problematic transformation process and ever-increasing polarization of the party spectrum, have proven to be the factors that together formed fertile conditions for the appearance of populism. These favorable conditions were noticed and taken advantage of, with varying degrees of success.

In the case of Slovakia we can distinguish two waves of populist parties. The first consisted of HZDS and ZRS, which were formed in the early 1990s during the political and economic transformation, and focused their attention on segments of society seen as having lost out in these processes. The second wave came during a period of high polarization in politics and among the public. During this stage SOP, Smer, and ANO gradually formed, and benefited from the existing conflict between two party blocs. The question remains whether OĽaNO can be classified together with these other parties, because it was founded quite a bit later than the others, and under somewhat different qualitative conditions.

These two waves, however, did not form two homogeneous categories that would differ significantly from one another. The parties do not fall into the same defined categories of populist parties that we are working with. While HZDS, SOP, and Smer (and OĽaNO) can be classified during their various periods as identitarian populist types of party, the ZRS and ANO represent partial populist types of parties. Although differences are observable between

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<sup>48</sup> This may be contradicted by the very presence of HZDS, which entered the executive at the same time. The basic difference between it and the trio of other parties was that the starting position of Mečiar's party was different, and from the standpoint of strength incomparable.



the parties of the two waves in various aspects such as internal organization or patterns of voter support, we can otherwise draw no strict lines between the parties of the two waves.

Populism in the Slovak context represented and continues to represent a means by which new party-type entities can achieve relevance, and seats in parliament. Our analysis of the cases, however, shows that this type of vehicle is fragile and unstable. For this type of party, participation in a coalition government means not only access to power; but a significant challenge, as it involves becoming “contaminated” with policies which they themselves had formerly opposed. As the cases of ZRS, SOP, and ANO show, when a party gets into executive power too soon, it can turn out to destroy the party. It seems to be more advantageous to serve first in the opposition, then later to hone one’s ideological message and move away from populism; although the model of Smer is not of sufficient scope to allow us definite conclusions in this regard. It will be interesting to see how OĽaNO deals with the same challenge.

## List of abbreviations

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| ANO   | Alliance of the New Citizen                   |
| HZDS  | Movement for a Democratic Slovakia            |
| KDH   | Christian Democratic Movement                 |
| KSS   | Communist party of Slovakia                   |
| Most  | Bridge  |
| ODS   | Civic Democratic Party                        |
| OF    | Civic Forum                                   |
| OE    | Ordinary people                               |
| OLaNO | Ordinary People and Independent Personalities |
| SaS   | Freedom and Solidarity                        |
| SDKÚ  | Slovak Democratic and Christian Union         |
| SDE   | Party of the Democratic Left                  |
| Smer  | Direction                                     |
| SNS   | Slovak National Party                         |
| SOP   | Party of civic understanding                  |
| VPN   | Public Against Violence                       |
| ZRS   | Association of Slovak Workers                 |

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