CENTRIST POPULISM AS A NEW COMPETITIVE AND MOBILIZATION STRATEGY IN SLOVAK POLITICS

Many post-communist countries including Slovakia have had experience of parties that, although established shortly before elections, manage to mobilize voters so effectively that they win seats in parliament and even a place in government. In Western countries this phenomenon is seen less frequently, but is also on the rise. Naturally, political scientists are anxious to understand how and why these parties manage to enter the political scene.

Previous research dealing with the phenomenon of centrist populism (Pop-Eleches, 2002; Učeň, 2003) has also attempted to find the answer. In the party systems of some post-communist countries, this competitive and mobilization strategy has clearly proven itself to be a reliable way of overcoming the quorum for parliamentary representation and even opening the door to executive power, in a relatively short time and at a reasonable financial cost.

In his previous work (Učeň, 2003), the author focused on describing the phenomenon of centrist populism, its chief features and the factors in its success against the backdrop of the recent election success of two new parties, namely Smer and the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO). Both parties based their success on the contrast between mainstream parties and those (like ANO and Smer) that portrayed themselves as an alternative to the mainstream and capitalized on the growing feeling among many voters that mainstream parties were failing to achieve almost anything that they had set out to do.

The logic behind their arguments was as follows: The 1990s in Slovak politics had been dominated by a conflict between two large and very antagonistic political camps (Učeň, 1999; 2000), which could be expressed

46 in shorthand as "Mečiar vs. the SDK". On one side of this conflict were nationalist and authoritarian forces that mobilized their voters and supporters by appealing to their nationalist instincts combined with their nostalgia for past certainties and identities related to the period before 1989. This force was challenged by the "democratic opposition", which initially profiled itself in terms of the rejection of nationalist and social populism, and subsequently against the growing authoritarianism and the threat to democracy from the campaign of the nationalist populists to remain in power. This group was further consolidated after it defended a liberal democratic model of political system relations.

This conflict was **dominant** not only in the sense that it decided the future rules of the game and political "survival", but also because it meant the only viable strategy for major political players was to stake out a position **within** this conflict, i.e. to identify with one of the two antagonistic camps and join it for good. Any attempt to stand aloof from this principal conflict and reject the associated behavior patterns was a ticket to political obscurity.

During this period, mainstream parties (i.e. authoritarian nationalist populists vs. liberal democrats) were formed amid the struggle over the future character of the political system and regime. Their principal aim was to become a constituent element of the party system, which was why they joined the battle in this formative conflict. Their main argument was that it was in the best interests of the country (nation, democracy, etc.) that the battle be fought and the adversary defeated.

Alternative parties emerged as soon as the formative conflict and its consequences began to arouse feelings of disappointment within certain population segments over how the system worked. New parties sprang into existence to present themselves as an alternative to either side in the principal conflict. They advertised their alternative nature by promising they would behave differently than the mainstream parties which – and this is the key element – began to be viewed as the source of the problems.

Favorable conditions for the success of these alternatives were created when the formative conflict began to be seen as pointless or even damaging, and after a significant share of the population ceased to distinguish between the parties involved in the conflict and began to lay blame equally. Our principal thesis was the assertion that, in line with development trends in some other post-communist countries, Slovakia's politics had undergone changes that laid the groundwork for the success of **third way strategies**; in this case, the third way referred to a path between Mečiar's

authoritarianism and the democratic opposition. These strategies included distancing the new party from the dominant conflict, positioning the party **outside** the struggle and questioning its relevance. What had seemed a dead-end strategy shortly before now promised to pay huge dividends in the form of voter support and access to power.

In other words, as soon as the decade-long struggle over the character of the regime ended, parties like the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), Smer and Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO) began to pursue new policies in terms of appealing to voters and drumming up support. This new phenomenon in Slovak politics was initially christened new "centrist" populism (Učeň, 2003; according to Pop-Eleches, 2002).

Why centrist? Mostly because this policy directly or indirectly refers to the ideological or geometric center of the party system. It is a result of the fact that centrist populism defines itself as an alternative to traditional mainstream parties (and their blocs) without inclining towards extremist policies. Its essence is distancing the party from the (sins of) mainstream politics; the central position is thus very suited to this type of distancing. This is what distinguishes the distancing strategy of centrist populists from that of extremists. It is not an anti-system extreme, as it does not position itself on the periphery of the system.

Why do we speak of populism? Because this strategy corresponds to what political scientists refer to as political populism. Over the past several decades, political populism has evolved into a competitive and mobilizing strategy based on an effort to distance a party from mainstream entities that have begun to be seen as dysfunctional or as a source of problems. Populist politicians deliberately feed and cultivate this perception, since the essence of populist politics is to manipulate the feeling of alienation between the elite and the masses. In their endeavor to discredit the existing elite and take its place, populists use quasi-direct appeals to people and quasi-personal communication with voters. Among the typical features of their appeal is an anti-politics, anti-party, anti-elite and anti-intellectual attitude and other forms of criticism of the establishment (see Canovan, 1999; Mény – Surel, 2001; Učeň, 2003).

Centrist populism in Slovakia must be thoroughly examined because in this country it seems to have the potential to influence or even determine the future of government policies. We must keep trying to describe centrist populism as a competitive and mobilization strategy; it is equally important to identify the presence of centrist populist appeals in policies pursued by the SOP, Smer and ANO, albeit in a more detailed and sys-

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48 tematic manner than in previous works (Učeň, 2003). Finally, it is helpful to address the prospects of centrist populism in terms of its viability, durability and attractiveness for newly emerging political entities.

NEW POPULISM

In the West, the term "new populism" usually refers to the policies pursued by some extreme right-wing parties. In our part of the world, however, new populism is located at the center of the political spectrum. The adjective "new" is used to distinguish it from the nationalist populism of former Slovak PM Vladimír Mečiar, whose dominant feature was the articulation of the populist argument in nationalist terms, frequently interchanging *demos* and *ethnos*.

In the Western context, populism is a strategy frequently used by political outsiders to gain power. This is also true of Slovakia, but in some cases (the SOP) the strategy was used by "recycled" establishment politicians who formed "new parties with old faces" to improve (or revive) their chances to succeed.

New centrist populism is a form of political populism that **emphasizes the anti-establishment element of its appeal** (for details on the differences between the various types of populism in post-communist Europe, see Mudde, 2000). In the past, older forms of populism dealt particularly with "the virtues of the people" and the need to return them to the heart of political life. In the Western and Latin American context, this phenomenon was examined by Andreas Schedler (Schedler, 1996), who refused to use the term populism at all and chose instead to employ the more laborious term **anti-political-establishment parties**.

This anti-establishment appeal is a generally defining feature of populism. It offers a view of political reality through the lens of an exaggerated dichotomy between the (unblemished) people and the (corrupt) elite. The essence of anti-establishment attitudes is that they focus on the ubiquitous conflict between the elite and the masses, between those who govern and those who are governed, between the establishment and ordinary people. They paint this conflict as acute, dramatic and ominous, claiming that the elite has betrayed and deserted the people.

A typical populist argument contains three key elements that at the same time may be considered the various stages of the appeal. First, the

people and their role in the political process are hailed as paramount. Second, the elite that is currently in power is derided as having betrayed the people. Finally, it is urged that the people's supremacy in politics be restored, meaning that the failed elite must be replaced by new leaders who put the people first and respect their interests (Mény – Surel, 2001, pp. 11 – 13).

How do populists describe the establishment? Their key strategy is to deny the existence of any differences within the establishment. All politicians are the same, they claim. In the better case, establishment leaders are irrational, incompetent and stupid; in the worse, they have lost the moral authority to govern because they are corrupt and rapacious. In all cases, they are insincere because they do not care about the people, but merely feign their "representative" roles and interest, and only care about themselves (Schedler, 1996, pp. 294 – 297). Criticism of the existing form and practice of representation is part of all populist arguments.

How do populists present themselves? Almost without exception, they define themselves as new people who are not part of the corrupt establishment. They also present themselves as apolitical, non-ideological players who refuse to be defined on the left-right continuum, often dismissing this form of categorization. Not only are they *homini nuovi*, or outsiders, they are also enemies of the establishment and frequently also victims of its past intrigues and reprisals. They are trying to change and remedy the current unsatisfactory state of affairs and are capable of putting such remedies into effect (Schedler, 1996, pp. 298 – 301).

Compared to party democracy, populist movements have no ambition to "educate the people" and shape their opinions within the framework of representation, such as by explaining situations when leaders must act contrary to public opinion. Parties that incline to populism want to mirror the people's opinions and at the same time manipulate them in terms of how they view the establishment. They want "the people" to identify with their criticism of the establishment and to grant them a mandate to replace it. To do that, they use extensive propaganda and rhetoric that differs fundamentally from traditional mainstream discourse in terms of the means of expression and courage in addressing taboo issues. Part of the charm of populism is that it speaks (or lies, according to many) about "skeletons in the closet" that establishment players have allegedly agreed to conceal.

Our primary goal is to **document the presence and extent of the various features of centrist populism in the public appeals of the SOP, Smer and ANO**. We will not deal with how these parties portrayed

"their people" within the populist dichotomy between the people and the elite (see Učeň, 2003). The principal focus of our examination will be these parties' use of populism and anti-establishment appeals as a competitive strategy towards to the establishment and a mobilizing strategy with respect to voters.

We will concentrate especially on **how populist critics interpret and criticize the establishment, how they distance themselves from it and how they present themselves as solvers of problems caused by the establishment**. We will also touch on their use of anti-politics and anti-ideology arguments and "third way" strategies.

CENTRIST POPULISM IN ELECTION COMPETITION

PARTY OF CIVIC UNDERSTANDING

In 1997, when it was first rumored that a new party would be established and its possible political priorities began to be discussed, the future Party of Civic Understanding (SOP, originally to be christened the Party of National Understanding) was widely considered a tool in the hands of one party to the aforementioned dominant conflict. Political commentators outdid each other with expressions like "the HZDS's subversive tactics", "asylum for Mečiar's privatizers", "the HZDS's Trojan horse in the opposition camp", and "Mečiar's torpedo".

The then-opposition parties hoped that the new party would lure away voters of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and mobilize the undecided. The governing parties, for their part, hoped the SOP would diminish the SDK's electoral support and that its main goal was "to modify the character of the current opposition" (Kubín, 1998). Voices claiming that the SOP represented a new political strategy were rare in the beginning: "The [SOP's] slogans about general reconciliation and helping Slovakia are presented to voters with a single purpose in mind: to portray the opposition as another party to the current conflict and as [a force] that does not wish peace and well-being for the country, unlike the dovish [SOP]" (Hríb, 1997).

It took everyone some time to understand that the SOP was from the outset an independent power-seeking strategy used by a group of political entrepreneurs with a left-wing background who understood that the

public was growing dissatisfied with the traditional players and was looking for a non-extremist form of criticizing the dominant conflict between Mečiarism and the opposition. The main reason for the party's election success was that it managed to define its attitude to the dominant conflict in a new and original way; it questioned the justification for the conflict, it morally distanced itself from it and claimed that its main aim was to build a bridge between the two archrivals and heal the wounds the conflict had inflicted. Its campaign against the dominant conflict was waged from the center.

At the beginning of the "civic understanding" project, one of the SOP's leaders, Pavol Hamžík, said the SOP had emerged as a manifestation of people's dissatisfaction with the ongoing confrontation in society, and claimed that public opinion polls had corroborated the SOP leaders' estimates of the demand for a similar party (*Sme*, March 30, 1998). At the party's founding congress, Hamžík reiterated that "the principle of understanding is [our] reaction to the polarization of the political scene that is dividing citizens… we wanted to transform the dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs into a political attitude, so that the pursuance of Slovakia's internal and foreign policy aims was not complicated" (*Sme*, April 3, 1998). These charming, self-exposing statements reveal an instrumental use of anti-establishment appeal in the SOP project.

The SOP's criticism of the establishment always employed two approaches. One, represented by SOP Vice-Chairman Marián Mesiarik, labeled both parties to the dominant conflict as extremist. The other, embodied by SOP Chairman Rudolf Schuster, declared that the SOP had always been a natural part of the anti-Mečiar coalition: "We belonged to the opposition bloc from the beginning, that is why we were established" (*Sme*, May 20, 1998). The dominance of the "Schuster view" within the party led the SOP to attempt to combine its criticism of the elite (including its partners in the anti-Mečiar alliance) with an openly anti-Mečiar attitude, which required it to justify its alliance with Mečiar's rivals.

While declaring itself part of the opposition, the SOP constantly tried to distinguish itself from the other opposition parties. To a remark that his party in the course of its campaign had occasionally abandoned the rhetoric of civic understanding in favor of radical anti-Mečiarism, Schuster said: "We are only playing the left-right game here. In practice, we will be forced to adopt identical measures." When asked whether the concept of civic understanding was merely meant to trick voters, Schuster responded: "No. Our methods are different from the rest of the opposition.

52 | We will make the concept of understanding between people a reality if we win" (*Domino Fórum*, No. 36, 1998).

The SOP was also a pioneer in portraying itself as a chance for new people and a party that cared about citizens' everyday problems. In this respect, the SOP was a contemporary of Róbert Fico, then an MP for the SDĽ.

SOP propaganda thus featured early forms of all centrist populist arguments, including distancing itself from the mainstream, criticizing the establishment, rejecting ideology and portraying itself as a third way party.[1] The key issues presented by the SOP featured many of the hallmarks of centrist populism, particularly its criticism of the establishment in its calls for reconciliation, dialogue and an end to political polarization.

From the outset, the SOP presented itself as a non-ideological or ideologically amorphous force and a third way party; while it stuck to this concept, it enjoyed solid public support. Without a doubt, it reacted to demand among some voters for this style of criticism. If the SOP ever lifted its non-ideology veil, the ideology that peeked out was indisputably leftist, decrying "too much capitalism and too little democracy", with a strong anti-authoritarian (or anti-Mečiar) slant.[2] A conclusion may be drawn that the SOP owed its success to its ideological amorphousness, and that its eventual downfall was the direct result of disputes over the eventual definition of its political and ideological profile.

SMER

Perhaps even before the SOP project was fully conceived, Róbert Fico as an member of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ) had come up with his early anti-establishment argument formulated in generational terms.

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1. In an interview for the *Sme* daily published on April 3, 1998, sociologist Vladimír Krivý said that the SOP championed a different kind of populism than that previously pursued by V. Mečiar.
2. Besides the elements already mentioned, the SOP appeal also featured a fairly strong regional, local and anti-centralist accent (i.e. the east vs. Bratislava). The SOP's profile also contained a strong pro-Western and pro-integration dimension, which reliably separated those disenchanted voters who became SOP sympathizers from those who inclined to more extreme ways of expressing their disappointment. Apolitical and "apolitical" celebrities from the domains of culture and sports also played an important role in the party's propaganda.

Fico spoke of the need to change generations in Slovak politics and bring in new faces. He argued there was a legally and politically viable solution to the pitiable state of affairs in Slovak politics, namely the joint resignation of both archrivals, Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and President Michal Kováč. Fico claimed that the era of politicians like the extreme-right Ján Slota, the former dissident Ján Čarnogurský, Mečiar and Kováč was over, and urged them to consider their future status on the country's political chessboard (*Pravda*, January 20, 1997).

At first, this propaganda was widely considered to be an attempt by Fico to promote himself within the SDĽ ranks and, subsequently, to gain some executive post. Only later was it clear that it had been a forerunner to Fico's independent strategy to promote himself within the political spectrum. In 1997, Fico gave only a hint of the complex populist propaganda cocktail he began to serve in earnest after 1999.

In the beginning, Fico's evolution from a lone populist into the leader of a full-fledged populist project took place within the left-wing SDĽ. He articulated his anti-establishment attitudes as part of his homage to the centrist-left wing; for instance, shortly after the emergence of the SOP, Fico expressed his hope that the SDĽ together with the SOP might win such voter support that they could prevent either the HZDS or the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) from forming the next government (*Sme*, June 20, 1998).

After the new SDK-SDĽ-SMK-SOP coalition government was formed, Fico had many opportunities to act as an opposition figure as well as a ruling coalition politician; nevertheless, this corridor soon became too tight for him. Following the 1998 elections, Fico gradually drifted away from the SDĽ (after he began to view traditional social democracy as ideologically too restrictive) as well as from the ruling coalition. He perceived both establishment entities as burdens and began to seek justifying arguments for having distanced himself from them. It was at this point that Fico did a "Full Monty" in terms of his anti-establishment attitudes and his backpedaling from the established players.

In January 1999, Fico renounced his post as SDĽ first vice-chairman. At the time, Marián Leško wrote for the *Sme* daily that Fico was preparing to launch a third alternative, supporting his argument with Fico's voting patterns in parliament. "[Fico wants to] demonstrate that he belongs neither to those who have brought the country into crisis nor to those who intend to rescue it by adopting a package of [restrictive] economic measures" (Leško, 1999).

54 As time went by, Fico added to his reputation as a solo politician, both through his legislative initiatives and his rhetoric, which respected no unwritten rules in terms of issues and how they were handled.

Immediately after the 1998 elections, Fico declared that including the ethnic Hungarian SMK party in government might lead to demands to revise the so-called Beneš Decrees (edicts that had ordered the forced repatriation of ethnic Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovak territory after World War II). In an article written for the *Práca* daily in May 1999, Fico elaborated on the issue. He argued that the SMK had merely brought its "regional agenda" to government and was successfully pursuing it. The gist of his argument was the proposal that the SMK be ousted from the ruling coalition, which would subsequently govern with the tacit support of the opposition parties. In support of his proposal, Fico argued that the SMK's success in pursuing its "regional agenda" might irk the public and lead to growth in support for extremists like Mečiar or Slota (Fico, 1999). This argument was unique because it played on anti-Hungarian and anti-Mečiar feelings at the same time!

In summer 1999, when Fico was still reluctant to admit to plans to found a new party, he said in an interview: "People may not want new parties, but they certainly want new people… Currently, my only interest is to begin presenting to Slovakia new people who come up with new solutions" (*Národná obroda*, June 3, 1999). In this period, Fico also proposed a thorough overhaul of the cabinet, claiming that the government was in crisis and that it was time for professionals and managers to take over. As a legislator, he focused mostly on the issues of public order, public security and combating corruption. These later became the "greatest hits" in Smer's repertoire; for instance, Fico proposed an amendment to the Slovak Constitution that would extend the time people who had been arrested could be kept in custody to 48 hours, and an amendment to the Criminal Code to introduce punishment for giving bribes.

The accumulation of similar arguments clearly indicated that Fico was evolving from individualistic self-promotion towards a full political project. In September 1999, after defecting from the SDĽ and the ruling coalition, Fico announced the formation of a new political entity.

At the party's founding congress, Fico granted an interview to some media in which he made clear that his new party was a finished product that would respond to voter dissatisfaction with the establishment in a sophisticated manner, and promote its own "third way". This cocktail contained all the **ingredients of political populism:**

- **the rejection of ideology:** "People in Slovakia do not distinguish between the right and left but between good and bad politicians and between those who want or don't want something";
- **the criticism of partisanship and politicking:** "If political parties incorporate their ideological attitudes into expert problems, which simply happens, they can never lead this country out of its crisis";
- **denying differences within the establishment**, to which he added the SOP: "All political parties that are in government look first towards their own political interests and only then at the essentials";
- **dramatically highlighting the coalition's failures:** "This country needs strong solutions that seek to secure normal relations, order and stability."

Fico was highly critical of the coalition form of government ("Everything we see in politics today is a matter of compromise, which is what harms Slovakia the most… A compromise only satisfies those who govern. The satisfaction of voters is secondary to them"), and claimed that after the change in government in 1998, the new administration had begun to use different methods, but the "quality and style of politics have not changed at all" (*Sme*, December 11, 1999).

To clarify our description and simplify the problem, we can divide Smer's appeals between December 1999 and September 2002 into competitive and mobilizing appeals.

The main purpose of **competitive appeals** is to gain a competitive advantage by criticizing and discrediting political rivals. Classic examples of competitive appeals include centrist populist strategies such as criticizing the establishment, partisanship, ideological politics and promoting the "third way".

As for **criticism of politics as a vehicle to pursuing ideological visions**, even before Smer was founded its leader had publicly stated that the single "internal philosophy of [Smer] will be rationalism and pragmatism" (*Národná obroda*, October 20, 1999). In support of this, Fico quoted a Chinese proverb: "It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white; what matters is that it catches mice" (*Sme*, May 26, 2000). In the same interview, Fico provided an unwitting example of a populist jettisoning the ideological burden, and praised the advantages of his populist project over the unwieldy social democracy he had rejected: "The SDĽ and Smer still have a lot in common. But unlike the SDĽ, we do not have to consider whether what we do or propose is in line with left-wing ideology" (*Sme*, May 26, 2000).

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Smer's **pragmatism** has been often presented in contrast to the politicking of traditional parties. Its **anti-partisanship** has also been expressed through its rejection of the traditional organizational structure, which according to Fico was largely why traditional parties had failed. Soon after emerging, Smer's leadership consisted only of its chairman, members of the party presidium and the heads of its expert sections, which was meant to underline that the party would focus on expert issues. As Fico said: "We are not a classic political party and we don't even wish to become one. We don't want to politick" (*Sme*, December 31, 1999).

Although Fico's appeal was anti-ideological, it was not anti-political – he never rejected the power aspect of politics or the legitimacy of power aspirations. On the other hand, he presented himself as someone interested in seizing power – perhaps even feeling a duty to do so – so he could govern differently and better. With that in mind, Smer and Fico came up with **various ways to criticize the establishment** and **various forms of distancing themselves from the established political players**. A prominent spot in this campaign was reserved for the **need to change the failed elite** (i.e. the need for new faces). On January 20, 2000, *Sme* published a truly charming quote from Fico: "It's against our principles for [Smer leaders] to accept anyone who has been an active member of another party – except myself."

The radicalism of Fico's public statements climaxed after he began to combine criticism of the establishment with a demand for strong government. In May 2001, Fico said that since clientelism and corruption in Slovakia had reached extreme and extraordinary dimensions, the government had to find the courage to adopt extreme and extraordinary solutions. He added that these decisions should not be taken by theoreticians but by managers of large corporations, people who knew what real life was all about (*Sme*, May 14, 2001).

The concept of **the third way** played an equally prominent role in Smer's crusade against the establishment, as it served as an instrumental argument to justify its policy of distancing itself from both of the two principal camps, i.e. the government and the opposition. The concept of "the third way" pooled all of Smer's propaganda arguments. As a concept it was flexible and vague enough to allow Smer to distinguish itself from other parties while getting away with not subscribing to any concrete (and hence verifiable) programs or principles. In other words, the concept allowed Smer's spin doctors to mix an attractive blend of economic, political, moral and other arguments.

On February 8, 2001, Fico said for the *Pravda* daily: "For us, the third way means political parties that do not come up with solutions just because they are to the right or to the left of center. A third way party focuses on the most pressing issues." On August 14, 2001, *Sme online* quoted Fico as saying that "Smer feels it is a third way party. It champions the type of politics that combine a strong economy and the importance of the market with a relatively strong role for a government managed by managers." In his party circular, Fico explained the advantages of the third way to his party colleagues and defined the party's main tactics: "We want to take advantage of the situation, in which two camps are fighting each other"(quoted according to Krištofík, 2001).

At its congress in December 2001, the party adopted a document called *Smer as a Party of the Third Way*. In the document, Smer subscribed to the third way concept represented by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. Fico's interpretation of the third way was this: "Simple right-wing and left-wing solutions have failed. That's why we have adapted the third way philosophy to Slovak conditions and decided to bring forward a program that respects values such as the market or production but at the same time recognizes the role of government and a strong state. Slovakia needs neither the left nor the right; it needs order, common sense and pragmatism" (*Sme*, December 17, 2001).

Columnist Marián Leško reacted by writing that in previous years, Fico had used the third way concept merely as an "escape clause from political self-identification" and an "avoidance maneuver that enabled him not to follow suit politically" and "not to admit that he didn't want to accept any color after all." Leško noted a glaring practical difference between Smer and the parties it had identified with: "Unlike the new Labour Party of Tony Blair and the SPD of Gerhard Schröder, a typical feature of the third way pursued by Fico's party has been that it identified with the extreme left on some issues and with the nationalist right on others" (*Sme*, December 17, 2001).

Leško pointed out that Smer used the third way as a propaganda tool. By subscribing to the third way before elections, Fico attempted to benefit from the advantages of non-ideology and pragmatism as well as capitalize on left-wing sentiment, and to create the impression that Smer was the Slovak version of the third way.

Mobilization appeals are regularly used to raise public support and often complement or elaborate on competitive appeals. In general, mobilization appeals are designed to portray a political party as a guarantee

that proposals will be advanced to solve concrete problems that the establishment is unable or unwilling to tackle.

Already, as a lone, unaffiliated member of parliament, Róbert Fico had been very active in terms of legislative initiatives. After Smer emerged he stepped up his activity, unleashing a range of legislative proposals, especially in the field of public order and security, the social security system, the political system, governance and representation, and the economy.

In the field of public security, Smer tried to capitalize on people's feelings of endangerment, criticizing the government's inability to guarantee public security and protect people's property. Fico again proposed that the Slovak Constitution be amended to extend the period of custodial arrest. He also initiated a "farmers' law" that gave landowners greater powers to protect their crops against theft, an activity pursued mostly by the Roma. Another notorious issue, perhaps the least controversial issue on Smer's agenda, was insisting that the government indemnify crime victims.

As for the welfare system, Fico chastised the government for tolerating the rampant abuse of unemployment and other welfare benefits: he proposed to eliminate those who abused the system from the unemployment register, to introduce a ceiling on child allowance regardless of the number of children a family had, and to make the disbursement of these benefits conditional on the school attendance of the children (*Sme*, June 10, 2000). These proposals were obviously aimed at eliminating the survival strategies used largely by members of the Roma minority. To Fico's credit, it should be noted that many of these proposals were put into practice by the second Dzurinda administration in 2003 and 2004, although at the time Fico proposed them they were branded as populist and anti-Roma.

As far as the political system and governance were concerned, Fico and Smer proposed to reduce the number of MPs in parliament and ministers in the cabinet, to extend the powers of the president (especially to dissolve the assembly), to introduce a majority or mixed electoral system, and to increase the quorum for securing seats in parliament to 8 %.

In the field of the economy, Smer proposed a strong and active state, but at the same time advocated more government for less money (i.e. by reducing the tax burden). Smer argued that the government should not be hasty in completing the privatization of state monopolies; naturally, this attitude earned accusations that Smer wanted to postpone the privatization process until it won power and its representatives in the cabi-

net gained control over it. Smer even proposed that power over privatization be transferred from the cabinet to parliament. Another notorious Smer activity was its campaign to complete the Mochovce nuclear power plant, which drew claims of a link between Smer and Slovakia's nuclear energy lobby.

The party's typical approach to problem-solving surfaced during the public debate over public administration reform, when Smer refused to take a clear stand on the issue and said it would support the reform once order was restored to the country. However, as soon as the final shape of the reform was approved, Smer criticized it: "The government is surrendering powers in the education system and health service and transferring them to self-governments because it doesn't know what to do with them. Public administration reform is the government's attempt to throw responsibility onto the shoulders of self-governments" (*Sme*, April 21, 2001).

Smer's mobilization campaign peaked shortly before the 2002 parliamentary elections, when it came up with the slogan "100 Solutions in the First 100 Days", underlining the party's determination to act swiftly once in power.

ALLIANCE OF THE NEW CITIZEN

When Pavol Rusko in January 2001 announced his intention to found a new liberal party with a social undertone, most people already knew he had previously considered entering politics through the left-wing SOP (see *Národná obroda*, January 23, 2001). This shift in Rusko's ideological orientation merely strengthened the general skepticism and suspicion that surrounded his new political project.

"In the beginning was a decision by an unnamed media mogul [Rusko] to enter top politics. This predetermined all later steps, beginning with market research, a media profile and ending with putting together a candidates' list and choosing [potential] political allies," wrote political analyst Juraj Marušiak (Marušiak, 2003). We should note that after conducting thorough market research, the new party – the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO) – put together an explicit and relatively convincing pro-capitalist political program.

The party's pitch featured all traditional centrist populist arguments, although its anti-establishment attitude was more moderate than that

of Smer. It focused on criticizing incompetence rather than chastising the elite for its moral failings; in particular, it criticized the unhealthy relationship between politics and the economy, as well as corruption and clientelism.

Besides its commitment to economic liberalism and the absence of "understanding" in its political message, ANO's appeal was similar to that of the SOP. The new party's founders stated: "The party's motto is the BRIDGE, since it aims to serve as a vehicle for new people to enter politics" (*Sme*, April 23, 2001). "This centrist and liberal party aims to appeal to dissatisfied voters, who are in the majority in Slovakia. Its founders' main aim is to attract new people who will not just criticize [the system] over a beer," the daily wrote.

Unlike Smer, the new party openly declared its centrist position and liberal orientation. ANO subscribed to reducing the role of the state. In an interview for the *Národná obroda* daily (April 21, 2001), Rusko advocated social liberalism. He said his party would support reducing the role of the government, cutting the tax burden and developing the private sector, while preserving a reasonable level of social solidarity. The agenda ANO brought to the 2002 election campaign was ideal for disenchanted center-right voters who were unhappy with the stalled reforms of the first Dzurinda administration.

CENTRIST POPULISM IN THE TEST OF ELECTIONS – IN POWER OR IN OPPOSITION

The common feature of all centrist populism parties was that they entered election campaigns with great expectations (largely shared by the public), but never scored the triumph they expected. In terms of voter support, all three parties did very well during the period between their founding and the elections; however, their eventual results were about half of their maximum voter support as indicated by polls before elections. In the case of both the SOP and ANO, this relative election failure was still enough to propel them into government, but in the case of Smer it resulted in its exclusion from government in 2002.

Let's now take a closer look at the possible implications of election success (or failure) on the future of centrist populist projects in terms of their viability and position within the country's party system.

PARTY OF CIVIC UNDERSTANDING

As early as March 1998, the specific nature of its appeal propelled the SOP to great heights in public opinion polls.[3] Having declared themselves part of the anti-Mečiar alliance, SOP representatives reiterated that their party's mobilization capacity would give the opposition a victory over the Mečiar bloc. The election results gave the anti-Mečiar alliance a qualified (three-fifths) majority in parliament, empowering it to amend the Constitution to cure some of the ills inherited from the Mečiar administration; for this purpose, the incorporation of the SOP in the new ruling coalition was unavoidable.

Although (or perhaps because) the SOP had no problems in joining the anti-Mečiar and pro-Europe alliance, its stint in government brought it neither stability nor consolidation. On the contrary, as soon as the party fulfilled its purpose, it began to be deserted by voters as well as those who had used it as a vehicle to power. The remaining SOP leaders eventually returned to where they felt most at home (i.e. the political left), only to later fuse with Smer.

Immediately after becoming part of the government, the SOP focused on fulfilling its main purpose, namely gratifying the personal ambitions of its leaders. The most glaring example of this was negotiations on the formation of the new government, when the party gave up a cabinet post it was entitled to in exchange for a promise by its coalition partners to support the candidacy of SOP Chairman Rudolf Schuster in presidential elections.

After Schuster abandoned the party and the personal ambitions of the other leaders were fulfilled, the SOP entered a difficult stage of ideological rebranding. This process was a direct result of the gradual decline in the party's voter support. It was accompanied by disputes over the party's future orientation on the issue of social liberalism vs. socialism. At

3. These surveys also revealed a declining share of undecided voters, which was widely attributed to the party's mobilization efforts. Back then, Schuster said: "Our primary goal is to appeal especially to those who have decided not to participate in elections, as well as first-time voters" (*Plus sedem dní*, No. 35, 1998). An exit poll conducted by the FOCUS agency for the International Republican Institute showed that these ambitions were well founded. Although the party's final election result was approximately half of its voting preferences in public opinion polls before elections, the party's mobilization impact on the camps of non-voters, undecided and first-time voters was significant. Eventually, the party attracted especially non-voters and first-time voters, who made up 29 % of its electorate; the remaining principal sources were the electorates of the former opposition parties (24 %) and the former governing parties (29 %).

62 | one point, party leaders proposed subscribing to the *Neue Mitte* (New Center) concept and incorporating the "new center" term into the party's name, although this idea did not receive much support.

In October 2000, after a short flirtation with *Neue Mitte* and social liberalism, the party definitively subscribed to social democracy. It gradually drifted towards criticism of government reforms and their impact on citizens; along with the SDĽ, it acted as an internal left-wing opposition within the ruling coalition. At the regional level, the SOP frequently teamed up with opposition parties to support joint candidates in municipal or regional elections. But the process of ideological redefinition did not produce the desired results. On the left side of the spectrum, there was no voter demand for another party, mostly because the SDĽ was still relatively strong and Smer had already been founded. Attempts to team up with other centrist parties (e.g. the LDÚ or the Greens) to increase its relevance were also fruitless, and the SOP was unable to prevent a gradual disintegration of its parliamentary caucus, the continuing decomposition of its membership base and a fatal slump in the polls. The party never ceased to be perceived as a destabilizing element in the ruling coalition.

We may assume that the main motivation for "new people" to support the SOP was its status as "the third force". Consequently, the party's rapid post-election fall may be due to the fact that this unstable group of supporters abandoned the SOP[4] as soon as the party lost this status.

The instrumental nature of this political project was obvious from the outset. During its short existence, the SOP earned many unflattering nicknames, such as "the disposable party" (see Kopeček, 2002). Mečiar, for his part, satirized the party's initials as standing for "Strana osobného prospechu [Party for Personal Gain]" (*Sme*, March 28, 1998); he was far from the only one who saw the SOP as a springboard to power.

Nevertheless, the SOP did have two historic meanings. First, by joining the ruling coalition in 1998, the SOP enabled it to control a constitutional majority of 93 votes in parliament, which not only represented a symbolic end to the Mečiar era but also allowed for a practical remedy to

4. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the IVO in November 2000, "more than one in three former SOP voters had joined the camp of undecided or non-voters by fall 2000. Approximately one in five former SOP voters switched to supporting Smer, which was more than the share of supporters who remained loyal to the SOP" (Gyárfášová et al, 2001, p. 109). Although hard data are unavailable to prove it, it is likely that for many former SOP voters, the camp of undecided voters or non-voters was just a stopover on their path towards Smer and ANO.

most of its excesses. Second, the party's success **demonstrated that the third way concept was viable in Slovakia and that the Slovak electorate was susceptible to it**. Two successors of the SOP's pioneering effort have made good use of this knowledge.

SMER

Like the SOP, Smer was a project based on its leaders' yearning for political power; unlike the SOP, however, Smer did not achieve its objective in elections, since the aim had been to gain a dominant executive position and not that of a strong opposition force. This unfulfilled goal has forced the project's designers to continue developing it, making the future of the project far more interesting (unlike the SOP project). Indeed, many ask whether the final product will match the HZDS in terms of size and impact.

Immediately after the 2002 elections, Smer defined its position as "a social alternative to the current rightist government." Analyst Marián Leško (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 12, 2002) highlighted Fico's method of using ideological labels. While he used the term "rightist" as a stigma to discredit his opponents, he refused to define Smer as a leftist force and instead rejected the right-left dichotomy altogether. Other commentators described the party as a fusion of a "social-democratic" wing and a "non-ideological or pragmatic" wing that some maliciously branded as entrepreneurial. To illustrate the conflicting opinions on the party's future profile, let's examine two articles published on the same day, one written by Smer Chairman Róbert Fico, and the other by then Vice-Chairman Boris Zala.

In his article called "The Slovak Third Way" Fico brought forward the previous anti-ideological arguments of centrist populism and highlighted the connection between Smer's policy and the third way in Europe: "We continue to reject the journalistic division of the political scene into the wasteful left and the efficient right. We want to react, in a rational and pragmatic manner, to all the challenges that have faced Slovakia in the 13 years since November 1989… The third way concept has developed from classic social-democratic parties. Since they understood the reality of the world, they survived and today they call the tune virtually across Europe… Smer as a third way party did not emerge by transformation from a classic leftist movement. As a rational party that calls for the return of com-

64 mon sense, it was shaped this way from the very beginning…" (*Pravda*, September 26, 2002).

Zala, in his article "Where Does Smer's Path Lead?", claimed: "In its third way program, Smer has clearly profiled itself as a center-left political force." Zala even defined the gist of Smer's "third way". According to him, it had evolved as an opposition to the two extremes in the Slovak leftist movement (!), i.e. the "old SDĽ" and a more moderate wing under former SDĽ boss Peter Weiss. Zala wrote he wished to develop Smer into "an unorthodox party that can take under its wings the broadest range of thought streams so it can preserve its perpetual ferment of thought: From [pure] leftists through social democrats in the middle and national liberals on Smer's right wing" (*Sme*, September 26, 2002). Obviously, Zala had in mind a slightly different party than his boss, and described it in thoroughly ideological terms.

The glaring differences in the positions taken in these articles neatly summed up Smer's dilemma immediately after elections, when its top officials had to decide whether to continue with their centrist populism project, to which the party owed its "successful past", or whether they should move towards traditional social democracy, which promised a successful future as the party had a strong chance to monopolize the left side of the Slovak political spectrum.

Following the collapse of the SDĽ, Smer had a unique opportunity to become the sole leader of the Slovak left, and it was clear that the leftist course was now rationally justifiable. The only thing that could spoil it was the strong reluctance of the party's populist leader to return to the boring and restrictive concept of social democracy that he had abandoned before, and that would be difficult to blend with his populist antics. Besides, interventions and restrictions by the Party of European Socialists, which Smer would have to put up with for the sake of international acceptance, implied the need to give up authoritarian policies that would not be accepted in Europe.

But arguments in favor of the shift toward "the ideological left" proved overpowering. In December 2002, immediately after its election failure and at a time when the party was struggling to adapt, it held a program conference at which it defined its aim to occupy the center-left segment of the political spectrum. Visibly reluctant to renounce the advantages of non-ideological populism, the party set **two parallel processes in motion: radicalizing party propaganda on social issues and subscribing to the political left in clearer ideological concepts**.

Its traditional criticism of the competence and ethics of the ruling coalition, together with its harping on corruption, bad governance and social and economic decline, became instrumental to Smer's attempt to force a change in government through early parliamentary elections: "As far as Smer is concerned, its only adversary is the rightist policy pursued by Mikuláš Dzurinda. We care for nothing else on Slovakia's political scene," Fico said at a party congress in spring 2003 (*Slovo*, No. 20, 2003). This effort peaked when Smer endorsed a petition started by the Slovak Confederation of Trade Unions that called for a referendum on ending the current parliament's tenure.

As part of its shift toward the left, Smer officials said they might change the party's name to "Smer – Social Democracy", and complied with the Party of European Socialists' requirement that Smer's candidates list for elections to the European Parliament include representatives of small traditional leftist parties, such as the SDĽ and Social Democratic Party in Slovakia (SDSS).

These tendencies became more visible at the party's congress in December 2003, at which Smer formulated a short-term policy of "going for the government's jugular", and defined early elections as its main aim. Juraj Marušiak interpreted Smer's December resolution to turn itself into a social democratic party as irreversible. However, he noted some curious aspects of the move: "Particularly baffling was the rapid course of Smer's 'social-democratization'. This party, which two years after its emergence still defined itself as pragmatic and non-ideological, has held no [internal] debate on changing course and choosing new values. And yet, its leaders and members accepted the party's new direction without a murmur of disapproval; one might say that after pragmatic reflection, they became social democrats…" (Marušiak, 2004).

Interpretations of Smer's current position vary greatly, from praise for the party for completing its natural ideological development, to accusations that Smer was trying to trick voters. One example of the former opinion is the assertion that Smer has always been a center-left party of the third way, or of the Blair-Schröder type, but unique Slovak conditions have long prevented it from fully subscribing to this concept.[5] The middle ground is occupied by the explanation that Smer's recent self-defini-

5. Mr. Róbert Kaliňák, Smer MP, presented this opinion at the conference *Party Government in Slovakia: Experience and Prospects*, when commenting the panel *Parties and their interactions*.

66 tion as a "social alternative to the current rightist government" was a compromise between Fico's centrist non-ideological populism and the sudden opportunity to enter the leftist mainstream, and that the party has not given up hope of combining these two approaches to its own benefit. Radical criticisms include the opinion that Smer has instrumentally, opportunistically, and formally seized the concept of social democracy to benefit from the failure of the traditional left in Slovakia.

The process of Smer's "social-democratization" brings back memories of the SOP, which after its election success also returned to where its leaders had come from, i.e. to the left. Both projects had one thing in common: An important circumstance attending their birth was the decision to abandon a classic social-democratic appeal to the traditional left-wing electorate, and to condemn it as a useless model without prospects. Some analysts argue that Smer's leaders see politics as some sort of enterprise, and have merely replaced one vehicle to power – i.e. centrist populism – with another, namely the "mainstream advantage". But if sailing into the mainstream is really another stop on Smer's journey to power, will it be able to avoid the fate that doomed the SOP? Smer certainly has a great chance to monopolize the left; the question is whether it truly wants to do so. Will Fico be able to pull it off by himself? Finally, will the new course prove as ephemeral as the previous one?

Doubts over Smer's willingness to abandon its populism focus on the party's leader. In a recent interview with the *Pravda* daily (February 4, 2004), Fico argued that Smer must use all means to achieve early elections in order to thwart a conspiracy by the *nouveau riches* from the HZDS and Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), who have teamed up maliciously against the people. While adding this new ingredient to his traditional populist anti-establishment cocktail, Fico objected to accusations that his party was a non-standard one, reasoning that the Socialist International had accepted Smer. These facts indicate that **Smer's most likely policy in the near future will be a blend of anti-establishment populism and social radicalism in terms of the traditional left**.

ALLIANCE OF THE NEW CITIZEN

After the 2002 parliamentary elections, ANO became part of the new government, allowing Smer to be relegated to opposition. Within a short time, however, it managed to damage its relationship with almost all its coali-

tion partners. The party also harvested frequent public accusations that the entire ANO project was a cynical bid for power.

On the one hand, ANO was criticized for abandoning its liberal philosophy; on the other, it was accused of never having stood on a truly liberal platform, and of using liberalism as a mere mobilization tool. Other critics claimed the party's policy line was subordinated to "private politics" of its leader, Pavol Rusko, whose main aim was to prevent his dodgy business past from catching up with him.

However, the main reason for the early troubles in relations between ANO and its coalition partners was the aggression and energy ANO displayed in its drive for government posts. The party dove into political disputes with its partners and did not hide its appetite for power, in obvious contradiction to its pre-election rhetoric. Before elections, Rusko had criticized the politicking of traditional parties, and advocated clear relations between politics and business. Later, after Róbert Nemcsics and Branislav Opaterný were ousted from ANO along with their personal support for liberalism, many felt that the "bridge" the party had supposedly built to bring new people into politics was a tool of conquest rather than communication. ANO dissidents testified to the party's hunger for power (see *Pravda*, August 11, 2003).

ANO almost eliminated itself from the ruling coalition after a series of noisy disputes with its coalition partners, particularly the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH), as well as several instances of voting with opposition parties in parliament; its coalition partners also demonstrated on certain occasions that they were able to govern without ANO. In the end, the party was saved from being booted out of government by a coincidence beyond its control: After Prime Minister Dzurinda and his SDKÚ ran into grave problems, ANO came in handy as an ally helping Dzurinda restore his influence in the cabinet and the coalition. Had that not happened, ANO would likely not have survived, as its elimination from power would probably have led to its collapse.

In the beginning, ANO was occasionally compared to Forza Italia, largely because of similarities between Silvio Berlusconi and Pavol Rusko (e.g. their media ownership). Later, the party received several accolades phrased in business terms. For instance, Milan Šútovec christened it a "go-getting joint-stock company" and a symbol of how (even rightist) politics could evolve into "a pragmatic business in compliance with the law on political parties" (*Sme*, March 9, 2003). Juraj Marušiak used the term "Political Ltd." (Marušiak, 2003). All these labels referred to the sheer

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instrumentality of the ANO project, which clearly exceeded levels acceptable in other political parties. Most importantly, the ANO project leaves the firm impression that its instrumentality is of a highly private nature, and that the party is motivated exclusively by private ambitions. Its hunger for power is even balder than that of Smer, which is why ANO is often called a tool for satisfying individual ambitions.

The truth is that as a vehicle to power that uses a moderate, newly populist mobilization strategy aimed at center-right voters, the ANO project has undoubtedly been successful. Its prospects now depend on various factors, including the future of Rusko's "private politics" and the attitude of law enforcement organs to them. Also, it will be important how long ANO's mutually beneficial alliance with the SDKÚ lasts; once it ends, ANO might become a scapegoat or the object of revenge by those who very reluctantly accepted its chairman as a coalition leader and economy minister. Last, the party's fate will depend on how Pavol Rusko performs in his ministerial post, and how this affects the balance of power within the party.

ATTRACTION AND PROSPECTS OF CENTRIST POPULISM

In developing democracies that are seen as problematic, political outsiders on the warpath against the establishment use populism as a strategy to gain power with ever-greater frequency. The voter support that populist political projects often receive may be seen as a reaction to defects in the functioning of the political system, especially its representation mechanisms, as well as a message to the elite about the level of voter dissatisfaction. In this sense, populism represents an alternative to voter apathy and non-participation. From the viewpoint of the elite, populism is the cat among the pigeons that prevents them from resting on their laurels. In any case, populism will always remain a source of unpredictable political behavior and, as such, will always provoke reactions from other political players.

New anti-establishment populism parties emerge as coalitions of the **ambitious** (i.e. those who know exactly why they joined the project and who expect concrete benefits from it) and the **disenchanted but hopeful** (i.e. those who support the project out of disappointment, protest and frustration while hoping for a remedy). The fate of these coalitions de-

pends on how both groups' attitudes develop. Leaders may desert the project for various reasons, while followers may turn their backs on it if they come to believe their hopes have been dashed. In such cases, they may return to the mainstream or invest their hopes in another "alternative", rushing off to another potential disappointment.

According to Mény, "the fact that populist parties are neither as stable nor as sustainable as governing parties derives from their very nature. Their fate is either to be integrated into the mainstream, to fold or to remain in permanent opposition" (Mény – Surel, 2001, p. 18). Karin Bottom argues that the incorporation of populists into the mainstream is virtually impossible. First, it is far from certain that they will want or be able to do so. However, the main obstacle is the centrality of their anti-establishment appeal to the logic of populism (Bottom, 2003).

Based on his Latin American expertise, Schedler offers a more systematic but also more speculative view of the prospects of populist parties. He argues that they have four basic choices: normalization (i.e. a shift to moderate platforms and incorporation into the mainstream); radicalization and a move to anti-system platforms; marginalization and collapse; and institutionalization (Schedler, 1996, pp. 304 – 306).

The key factor in which of these options is pursued is the behavior of anti-establishment populists once they gain power. If they are content with mainstream perks, there is a high probability that they will become normalized. If they grow radical while in power, they may well disrupt the system. However, the most interesting option is if they try to capitalize on their mainstream position and simultaneously cling to their anti-establishment platforms. If they succeed, the final result may be the birth of rule by decree. If they don't succeed, they may face a no-confidence vote and removal. If the result is even, a deadlock may ensue.

What are the political implications of centrist populism parties winning recognition and breaking through? What are they capable of bringing to politics and what can they actually contribute? Some may well become comets that streak by without leaving a trace. The opposite extreme is that they leave the system in ruins. However, it is most likely that they shake up the system and have a permanent and perceptible impact, such as by redefining the political agenda (i.e. when mainstream parties begin to deal with issues introduced by populists) or enlivening the party competition (i.e. when mainstream parties begin to experiment with populists' methods). They may also provoke waves of counter-mobilization or cause de-alignment in some other way.

70   As far as post-communist countries are concerned, centrist populism may quickly fade as a relevant political force, largely because it features a strong element of short-term instrumentality motivated by efforts to gain power. The willingness to keep centrist populism parties alive may easily dissipate after their protagonists (leaders, patrons and clients) reach their goals. However, it is also possible that centrist populism will become a more permanent solution to the problems of these political systems, especially the consistent failure of mainstream parties and their inability to keep their election promises. Centrist populism can only benefit from the fact that more and more ordinary people are beginning to realize the main reason for this failure is outright corruption, greed and abuse of power and trust.

Apart from Smer, centrist populism in Slovakia is relatively restrained. While it does focus on criticizing the establishment, the intensity of this criticism – again, with the exception of Smer – doesn't begin to compare to Mečiar's populism at its peak. Especially in the case of the SOP and ANO, their criticism of established political players has been moderate. Against the background of this vague criticism, these parties deploy a "third way" argument whose effectiveness may decline with time.

The SOP's version of the third way, together with its idea of civic understanding, is pretty much dead. Its only importance was in demonstrating that the concept was viable in Slovakia, and that a political party could walk the third way, at least to parliament. Its successors, Smer and ANO, have never flirted with the moderate appeal of reconciliation and understanding. Instead, they have played the evergreen part of post-communist populism, creating the impression that, unlike traditional players, populist politicians and their parties put the interests of the people above their own. What was one of the two principal reasons for Mečiar's success is also the main aim of the activities pursued by Róbert Fico or Pavol Rusko, for all that their mobilization strategies are different.

ANO targeted its restrained populism at the disenchanted voters of the right; however, its heavily self-serving behavior makes it a potentially short-term project that may not survive once it no longer has access to the spoils of power. The prospects of Smer are much more interesting, mostly because its leaders' failure to attain executive posts has forced them to continue with their populist project and even to attempt to institutionalize it. Smer has taken the path of subscribing to mainstream social democracy and leading the Slovak left. This may have

taken the radicalism out of some of its populist arguments, especially anti-partisanship and anti-ideology. However, we can expect that **in the near future, one of the major sources of initiative in Slovak politics will be Smer's attempt to combine the advantages of its status as an established player with the freedom enjoyed by a populist agitator**.

CONCLUSION

What is the attraction of centrist populism for existing and newly established parties in Slovakia?

It is often argued that Smer and ANO have something in common with the SDKÚ. The main reason for drawing such a parallel is their pragmatism and avoidance of ideological disputes. However, this does not justify speculations that the SDKÚ is also a centrist populist party. It is not, largely because it has never portrayed itself as an alternative to the mainstream. In the most extreme case, it has presented itself as a new version of one of the mainstream parties.

Most importantly, though, the SDKÚ has established its legitimacy as a declared successor to the SDK with the ambition to unite the entire nonleft segment of the mainstream, a mission that has been rewarded by its voters. No matter how attractive or even rational centrist populism might appear to individual SDKÚ officials, they seem to realize that it is impossible to represent both the mainstream and an alternative to it at the same time. Besides, due to questions of legitimacy, tactics and international acceptability, it has been crucial for the party not to question its declared affiliation to the mainstream European right. Certain similarities between the SDKÚ on the one hand and Smer and ANO on the other definitely exist; however, they differ from the focus of this paper, and deserve to be examined separately.

Another topical question is whether centrist populism may become a viable option for the Free Forum (SF), a recent splinter from the SDKÚ. For the time being, the party defines its program as a revival of the original program of one of the mainstream parties (the SDKÚ); however, the gates of centrist populism remain open to it. The SF may resort to this type of politics when it chooses to distinguish itself from the entire ruling coalition, as opposed to only Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda and

72 | his SDKÚ.[6] If the SF is able to keep its current distance from the opposition in future political disputes, it may gradually develop its own version of the third way. We might wonder if it will walk this path in Smer's shadow.

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6. The "sociological turnaround" in the appeal of the Freedom Forum (SF) deserves special attention in this respect, when Zuzana Martináková enlivened the somewhat stale value-oriented arguments of SF Chairman Ivan Šimko by adding a little sociology. Z. Martináková pointed out that the ruling coalition (i.e. not just Dzurinda and his SDKÚ) was pursuing policies that benefited only the rich while ruining the middle class. If the SF begins to argue that the current reforms are problematic and that the negligent and insensitive governing elite is to blame, then this is likely to be interpreted as an attempt to attract the center-right electorate through centrist populism.

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