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# THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR IN THE CAMPAIGN PRECEDING THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC (SEPTEMBER 30, 2023)

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## Abstract:

The campaign preceding the snap elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, held on September 30, 2023, constituted a significant moment for analysing the positions of Slovak political parties towards the Russo-Ukrainian War. It should be emphasised that these were early elections, which brought to an end the tenure of the caretaker government of Ludovít Ódor, in office in Slovakia since May 15, 2023. In many respects, the parliamentary elections amounted to a plebiscite on whether the Slovak Republic would continue its integration with the European mainstream or instead evolve towards a Hungarian-style model, with the war in Ukraine serving as the principal dividing line. For the purposes of this study, the hypothesis was advanced that an electoral victory for the SMER party entailed the risk of a shift in Slovakia's position on assistance to Ukraine and a move towards illiberal democracy. The article examines the Slovak Republic's position on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine during the governments of Eduard Heger and Ludovít Ódor, public opinion on this issue, and the course of the election campaign. The study employs a comparative method to analyse and compare the programmes of Slovak political parties.

**Keywords:** Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia, war, elections

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## Introduction

The campaign preceding the snap elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, held on September 30, 2023, was a critical juncture for assessing the strategies and positions of Slovak political parties regarding Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. These elections, which followed the collapse of the previous government and marked the end of the caretaker administration led by Ľudovít Ódor (in office since May 15, 2023), were significant not only in terms of domestic politics but also for Slovakia's role within European and transatlantic structures. The contest was widely perceived as a plebiscite on the country's future orientation: whether Slovakia would pursue deeper integration with the European mainstream or adopt a trajectory resembling the Hungarian model, characterised by a more ambivalent approach towards the European Union and NATO. The principal dividing line of the campaign was the question of military and political support for Ukraine.

For the purposes of this study, it was hypothesised that an electoral victory for Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-sociálna demokracia) would increase the likelihood of a reorientation in Slovakia's foreign and security policy, particularly with regard to assistance to Ukraine, while also contributing to a gradual drift towards a model of illiberal democracy. To test this assumption, the article analyses Slovakia's official stance on the war during the governments of Eduard Heger and Ľudovít Ódor, examines trends in Slovak public opinion, and reconstructs the dynamics of the 2023 electoral campaign. Particular attention is devoted to the rhetorical strategies employed by the principal political parties, the polarisation of political discourse, and the framing of the war in relation to domestic political and economic issues.

The study employs a comparative method, enabling a systematic juxtaposition of the electoral programmes of Slovak political parties and the positions they articulated regarding the war in Ukraine, broader questions of European integration, and the principles of democratic governance. In doing so, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how external conflicts shape domestic political competition in Central and Eastern Europe and highlights the extent to which Slovakia's 2023 elections may serve as an indicator of the region's evolving democratic trajectory.

## **The Response of the Slovak Republic to the Russian Federation's Aggression against Ukraine**

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation escalated its confrontation with Ukraine by launching a full-scale invasion, thereby marking a new and unprecedented phase of the conflict. At that time, Eduard Heger was serving as Prime Minister, before being replaced in May 2023 by a technocratic cabinet led by Ľudovít Ódor. From the outset of the war, Slovakia expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine across diplomatic, military, and humanitarian dimensions. Nevertheless, this commitment was accompanied by domestic political instability and practical challenges in the reception and integration of refugees fleeing the conflict.

Prime Minister Heger consistently advocated the economic isolation of Russia, endorsing successive European Union sanctions packages, including Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT financial system. At the same time, the Slovak government sought to position itself as a potential mediator by calling for the organisation of peace negotiations in Bratislava a proposal that received support from several opposition parties, including those known for their pro-Russian sympathies. President Zuzana Čaputová also played a visible role in the regional diplomatic response. Together with the heads of state of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovenia, she signed a letter on February 28, 2022 expressing unequivocal support for granting Ukraine candidate status in the European Union (Reuters, 2022).

Slovakia's policies, however, were not without initial hesitation. Unlike some neighbouring states, it did not immediately close its airspace to Russian aircraft, doing so only on February 27, 2022 in line with a collective European Union decision (Council Regulation, 2022). Military and logistical assistance was nevertheless substantial. Even before the full-scale invasion, Slovakia had supplied Ukraine with two Božena 5 demining systems as well as medical supplies. Following the outbreak of the war, the Heger government expanded its support to include artillery ammunition, diesel fuel, and aviation fuel. As a frontline state bordering Ukraine, Slovakia also faced a large influx of refugees: by March 6, 2022, approximately 113,000 individuals had crossed the Slovak–Ukrainian border (Seresova, Štefančík, 2024, pp. 141–159).

Bratislava also actively participated in multilateral efforts at both the European Union and NATO levels. On the very day of the invasion, Slovakia, together with Poland and several other NATO member states, requested

consultations of the North Atlantic Council under Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. Shortly thereafter, on March 3, 2022, Prime Minister Heger hosted the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in Bratislava, where they discussed humanitarian assistance and the possibility of introducing additional sanctions against Russia, particularly in the energy sector (Ogrodnik, 2022). At the regional level, Slovakia also joined diplomatic initiatives such as the 8 March meeting in London between the prime ministers of the Visegrád Group and Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (United Kingdom – V4, 2022).

Public opinion, however, revealed deep societal divisions. A March 2022 study conducted by the Slovak Academy of Sciences found that 34% of respondents believed that the war had been deliberately provoked by the West, while 28% accepted Russia's justification of "denazification". Moreover, 27% subscribed to the claim that Ukraine had committed genocide against Russian-speaking populations in the Donbas, and 13% believed that Ukraine was pursuing nuclear weapons. These findings pointed to the significant penetration of pro-Russian narratives and disinformation within Slovak society. A further survey conducted by the Focus agency for GLOBSEC in September 2022 revealed that 19% of Slovaks wanted Russia to win the war, the highest proportion among supporters of the far-right Republika movement (55%), followed by voters of Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD) at 36.6%. By contrast, the strongest support for a Ukrainian victory was observed among voters of the then governing Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní *Ludia* a nezávislé osobnosti, OLaNO) and its allied parties, as well as among supporters of the liberal opposition parties Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Progressive Slovakia (Kerekes, 2022).

By May 2023, GLOBSEC surveys indicated further evidence of public ambivalence towards Slovakia's Western alignment: one-third (33%) of Slovaks expressed support for leaving NATO, compared with only 2% of Poles, 6% of Hungarians, and 12% of Czechs. Although 57% of Slovak respondents agreed that weapons should be supplied to Ukraine –considerably lower than the 93% recorded in Poland and 80% in the Czech Republic – a striking 69% also believed that such assistance merely provoked Russia and prolonged the war, compared with 34% in Poland and 38% in the Czech Republic. Within Central and Eastern Europe, similarly sceptical attitudes were observed only in Bulgaria. According to GLOBSEC analyst Dominika Hajdu, these trends may be explained primarily by the effectiveness of pro-Russian disinformation

campaigns, which – together with the cases of Hungary and Bulgaria – have rendered Slovakia particularly vulnerable to Kremlin narratives (GLOBSEC, 2023).

The intensification of pro-Russian propaganda on social media, amplified by opposition rhetoric and compounded by the deteriorating economic situation, has thus contributed to growing scepticism among Slovaks towards the West and to increasingly ambivalent support for continued assistance to Ukraine.

## Parliamentary Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic

The early parliamentary elections held on September 30, 2023 marked the end of the caretaker government of Ľudovít Ódor, which had governed Slovakia since May 15, 2023. A total of 25 party lists were registered, reflecting a highly fragmented political landscape. Ultimately, the election resulted in a victory for Direction-Social Democracy, which secured 22.94% of the vote and 42 seats in parliament.

Table 1. Results of the Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (September 30, 2023)

No.	Political party	Number of votes	%	Number of seats
1	Direction-Social Democracy	681,017	22.94	42
2	Progressive Slovakia	533,136	17.96	32
3	HLAS-Social Democracy	436,415	14.70	27
4	OLĀNO and Friends	264,137	8.89	16
5	Christian Democratic Movement	202,515	6.82	12
6	Freedom and Solidarity	187,645	6.32	11
7	Slovak National Party	166,995	5.62	10
8	Republic	141,099	4.75	–
9	Alliance-Hungarians, Nationalities, Regions	130,183	4.38	–
10	Democrats	87,006	2.93	–
11	We Are Family	65,673	2.21	–
12	Kotlebists-People's Party Our Slovakia	25,003	0.84	–
13	Communist Party of Slovakia	9,867	0.33	–

No.	Political party	Number of votes	%	Number of seats
14	Pirate Party-Slovakia	9,358	0.31	–
15	Blues-Most-Híd	7,935	0.26	–
16	Hungarian Forum, Civic Democrats of Slovakia, For Regions, Roma Coalition, Democratic Party	3,486	0.11	–
17	We Slovakia	2,786	0.09	–
18	Karma	2,407	0.08	–
19	Together Citizens of Slovakia	2,401	0.08	–
20	Heart Patriots and Pensioners – Slovak National Unity	2,315	0.07	–
21	Principle	1,817	0.06	–
22	Justice	1,335	0.04	–
23	Slovak Revival Movement	1,332	0.04	–
24	Patriotic Bloc	1,262	0.04	–
25	Slovak Democratic and Christian Party-Democratic Party	771	0.02	–

Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, <https://volby.statistics.sk>

SMER-SD's campaign was characterised by a clear and distinctive message. In economic terms, the party advocated stronger state intervention and the expansion of social policies, positioning itself as a defender of ordinary citizens during a period of economic uncertainty. In foreign policy, however, its representatives adopted a markedly pro-Russian orientation: they criticised the United States' support for Ukraine, attributed responsibility for the war to Kyiv, and reproduced narratives aligned with Russian propaganda. Echoing the Hungarian government's position, SMER-SD also questioned the effectiveness and legitimacy of sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. While previous SMER-led governments had brought Slovakia into the eurozone and maintained a pro-integration stance, the party increasingly directed its criticism towards European Union institutions during this campaign (Žarna, 2024, pp. 155–168). By exploiting public dissatisfaction with the economic situation and anxieties about the war's consequences, SMER-SD, under the leadership of Robert Fico, successfully mobilised anti-elitist and anti-establishment

sentiments, framing both the government and the European Union as actors marginalising Slovak interests.

Progressive Slovakia (Progressívne Slovensko, PS) emerged as the second strongest political force, securing 17.96% of the vote and 32 seats. This represented a substantial improvement over 2020, when the PS-led coalition failed to surpass the 7% electoral threshold. Under the leadership of Michal Šimečka, Vice-President of the European Parliament, PS campaigned on a strongly pro-European and pro-Atlantic platform, emphasising continued support for Ukraine, the maintenance of sanctions against Russia, and the introduction of majority voting in selected areas of European Union foreign and security policy. Domestically, the party identified three priorities: revitalising the economy, reforming the healthcare system, and improving public trust and social cohesion. Although not a populist movement in the strict sense, PS nevertheless appealed to emotions, particularly through its emphasis on combating corruption and strengthening democratic institutions, thereby presenting itself as a force for renewal and political change (Progressívne Slovensko, 2023).

Voice-Social Democracy (Hlas-sociálna demokracia, Hlas-SD), a splinter party from SMER founded by former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, secured 14.70% of the vote and 27 seats. Its programme centred on social solidarity, promising accessible healthcare, lower energy and food prices, and the protection of Slovakia's national interests. Unlike SMER, however, Hlas-SD emphasised the strategic importance of the European Union and NATO as guarantors of Slovakia's security and prosperity (Hlas-sociálna demokracia, 2023). Yet, during the campaign, the party's representatives also called for a halt to military assistance to Ukraine, arguing that Slovakia's national resources were being overstretched.

Several smaller parties also crossed the electoral threshold, albeit with more modest results. Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, led by Igor Matovič, secured 8.89% of the vote and 16 seats, representing a dramatic decline from 2020, when it had won 25.02% and 53 seats. Despite its extensive 242-page programme, which focused on anti-corruption measures, family support, education, and healthcare, OLaNO's campaign was overshadowed by controversial proposals, most notably the idea of paying citizens €500 for participating in the elections – an initiative estimated to cost €1.5 billion, with no funding sources identified (OLaNo a priatelia, 2023a; 2023b).

The Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie, KDH) re-entered parliament with 6.82% of the vote and 12 seats. Its programme

emphasised traditional Christian-democratic values, such as human dignity, solidarity, justice, and freedom, alongside policy priorities in healthcare, education, and family support. The party strongly supported Ukraine as well as deeper integration within the European Union and NATO. Nevertheless, its campaign was affected by populist statements, including a controversial remark by its leader, Milan Majerský, who equated LGBT+ people with corruption. He later sought to clarify this statement as a critique of “ideology” rather than of individuals (Dedinský, 2023).

Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), a liberal party emphasising economic reform, secured 6.32% of the vote and 11 seats, a result broadly comparable to that of 2020. SaS firmly supported Ukraine, European Union integration, and cooperation within NATO, and distinguished itself by publishing a separate programme for national minorities, thereby underscoring their significance as a group that constitutes 11% of the Slovak population (Sloboda a Solidarita, 2023).

The Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana, SNS) returned to parliament with 5.62% of the vote and 10 seats. Its 15-point programme emphasised social protection, economic security, and the preservation of cultural heritage. In contrast to the liberal and centrist parties, SNS opposed military assistance to Ukraine and advocated ending defence cooperation with the United States (Slovenská národná strana, 2023).

Outside parliament, several parties performed below expectations. The far-right Republic (Republika) secured only 4.75% of the vote, despite its aggressive anti-immigration and anti-European Union rhetoric (Kolesnychenko, 2023). Parties representing the Hungarian minority also failed to cross the electoral threshold, largely owing to their inability to unite behind a single electoral list. The Democrats secured only 2.93% of the vote, while the People’s Party Our Slovakia collapsed to 0.84%, down sharply from 7.97% in 2020. Similarly, We Are Family (Sme rodina) received only 2.21% of the vote (Štatistický úrad SR, 2023).

Overall, the elections reflected a deeply polarised electorate, divided not only by traditional left–right cleavages but also by divergent attitudes towards European integration, the transatlantic alliance, and the war in Ukraine. The results underscored the resilience of populist and nationalist narratives, the relative fragility of liberal-democratic forces, and the continuing uncertainty surrounding Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation.

## Conclusion

Attitudes towards Ukraine's struggle for independence have become a defining factor in Slovak domestic politics. Political parties articulated divergent positions on the Russo-Ukrainian War not only regarding the Slovak Republic's membership in the European Union and NATO, but also within the broader domestic political arena. These divisions became particularly visible during the 2023 parliamentary election campaign, which in many respects resembled a referendum on the country's geopolitical orientation.

The electoral competition revealed two distinct political blocs. On one side stood parties such as Direction-Social Democracy, Voice-Social Democracy, and the Slovak National Party, which questioned the effectiveness of sanctions, criticised Western involvement, and promoted a more cautious – if not openly sceptical – approach to supporting Ukraine. On the other side were OĽaNO, SaS, For the People (Za ľudí), We Are Family, and the governments of Eduard Heger and Ľudovít Ódor, which consistently endorsed comprehensive assistance to Ukraine across political, military, economic, and humanitarian dimensions, while articulating these positions within NATO and European Union frameworks. The stark contrast between these two camps underscored not only divergent interpretations of the causes and consequences of the war, but also competing visions of Slovakia's long-term place within Euro-Atlantic structures.

The formation of a coalition government composed of Direction-Social Democracy, Voice-Social Democracy, and the Slovak National Party, with Robert Fico returning as Prime Minister for the fourth time, marked a turning point in Slovakia's policy towards the Russo-Ukrainian War. This outcome carries significant implications. Domestically, it reflects the capacity of populist and nationalist narratives to capitalise on public dissatisfaction with the economic situation and scepticism towards Western institutions. Internationally, it raises important questions regarding Slovakia's reliability as a partner within NATO and the European Union, particularly in the context of collective support for Ukraine and broader regional security.

In conclusion, the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections highlighted the extent to which external conflicts can reshape domestic political competition in Central and Eastern Europe. The results confirmed the central role of the Russo-Ukrainian War as both a key dividing line in Slovak politics and a test of the country's strategic orientation. Future research will need to assess whether

the new government's policies represent a temporary shift or a more enduring realignment of Slovakia's position within the Euro-Atlantic community.

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## **WOJNA ROSYJSKO-UKRAIŃSKA JAKO TEMAT KAMPANII POPRZEDZAJĄCEJ WYBORY PARLAMENTARNE W REPUBLICIE SŁOWACKIEJ (30 WRZEŚNIA 2023 ROKU)**

### **Streszczenie**

Kampania poprzedzająca przedterminowe wybory do Rady Narodowej Republiki Słowackiej, które odbyły się 30 września 2023 roku, stanowiła istotny moment dla analizy stanowisk słowackich partii politycznych wobec wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej. Należy podkreślić, że były to wybory, które zakończyły okres sprawowania władzy przez techniczny rząd Ludovíta Ódora, funkcjonujący na Słowacji od 15 maja 2023 roku. W wielu aspektach wybory parlamentarne przybrały charakter plebiscytu dotyczącego tego, czy Republika Słowacka będzie kontynuować integrację z głównym nurtem europejskim, czy też ewoluować w kierunku modelu węgierskiego, przy czym wojna w Ukrainie stanowiła główną linię podziału. Na potrzeby niniejszego badania sformułowano hipotezę, zgodnie z którą zwycięstwo wyborcze partii SMER niesło ryzyko zmiany stanowiska Słowacji wobec wsparcia dla Ukrainy oraz przesunięcia w kierunku demokracji nieliberalnej. W artykule przeanalizowano stanowisko Republiki Słowackiej wobec rosyjskiej wojny napastniczej przeciwko Ukrainie w okresie rządów Eduarda Hegera i Ludovíta Ódora, opinii publicznej w tej kwestii oraz przebieg kampanii wyborczej. W badaniu zastosowano metodę porównawczą w celu analizy i zestawienia programów słowackich partii politycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Słowacja, Ukraina, Rosja, wojna, wybory

### **Author Contributions (Wkład autorów)**

Conceptualisation (Konceptualizacja): Krzysztof Żarna

Data curation (Zestawienie danych): Krzysztof Żarna

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Writing – review & editing (Piśmiennictwo – sprawdzenie i edytowanie): Krzysztof Żarna

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**Biographical note**

Professor at the University of Rzeszów, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and a member of the Institute of Political Science and Security Studies. He holds a habilitation degree in Social Sciences in the discipline of Political Science, with a specialisation in International Relations (Jagiellonian University, 2016). His research interests include international relations, internal security, and human rights, with particular emphasis on the Slovak Republic as well as issues of war crimes and genocide in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. He is the author of 150 scholarly publications and has participated in numerous national and international academic conferences. He has completed a number of research fellowships at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the University of Belgrade, the University of Naples Federico II, the University of Prešov, and the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. He is a member of national and international academic associations, including the European International Studies Association, Associazione Territori Digitali (Te|Di), the Polish Political Science Association, the Polish Association of International Relations, the Polish Association for European Studies, and the Polish Society for Security Studies. He is the principal investigator of the Regional Initiative of Excellence project “Migrants from Ukraine in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship: Socio-Economic Implications”.

**Nota biograficzna**

Profesor Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, dziekan Wydziału Nauk Społecznych oraz pracownik Instytutu Nauk o Polityce i Bezpieczeństwie. Doktor habilitowany nauk społecznych w dyscyplinie nauki o polityce, ze specjalnością stosunki międzynarodowe (Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 2016). Jego zainteresowania badawcze obejmują stosunki międzynarodowe, bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne, prawa człowieka, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Republiki Słowackiej oraz zagadnień zbrodni wojennych i ludobójstwa na obszarze byłej Jugosławii. Autor 150 publikacji naukowych oraz uczestnik licznych krajowych i międzynarodowych konferencji naukowych. Odbył liczne staże naukowe w: Słowackiej Akademii Nauk, Uniwersytecie w Belgradzie, Uniwersytecie Fryderyka II w Neapolu, Uniwersytecie w Preszowie, Uniwersytecie Iwana Franki we Lwowie. Członek krajowych i międzynarodowych towarzystw naukowych, m.in. European International Studies Association, Associazione Territori Digitali (Te|Di), Polskiego Towarzystwa Nauk Politycznych, Polskiego Towarzystwa Stosunków Międzynarodowych, Polskiego Towarzystwa Studiów Europejskich, Polskiego Towarzystwa Nauk o Bezpieczeństwie. Kierownik projektu Regionalnej inicjatywy doskonałości „Migranci z Ukrainy w województwie podkarpackim. Implikacje społeczno-gospodarcze”.