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European Union in the language of the Slovak far-right

SUMMARY The article analyses the communication strategies of the far-right representatives in a diachronic perspective. The aim is to find out how the far-right reflected Slovakia's membership in the European Union, what narratives and arguments they used, and what themes they emphasised. I start from the assumption that the far right presents the EU as one of the enemies of the Slovak "people". I state my findings through discourse analysis. The corpus comprises different types of speeches, ranging from statements on social networks to speeches in parliament, to public events at which representatives of the far right expressed their views on the EU. From a diachronic comparison, we can argue that in 2016, when the LSNS entered the parliament for the first time, the party advocated Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU. After two terms in the national parliament and winning seats in the European Parliament, the new far-right Republican Party is pushing for the reform of the EU to strengthen economic cooperation between member states and minimize political integration. Despite the shift in views on the EU, representatives of the Slovak far-right present the EU in a mostly negative light.

KEYWORDS Slovakia, European Union, far right, migration, war in Ukraine

Introduction

The communication strategies of the far-right are usually based on a simple, black-and-white, dichotomous logic in the sense of friend vs. enemy, or us vs. the others, or strangers (Schuppener, Demčíšák, & Fraščíková, 2021). While on one side stands the people as the central category of the far right (Norris &

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Inglehart, 2019; Štefančík & Stradiotová, 2021), on the other side stand the others. As a rule, the far right creates an image of the enemy into which it projects multiple negatives and then presents these to its voters. The question remains, of course, who the enemy is. Indeed, the enemy is often fictitious, not threatening the interests of the people, but since fear and inducing a sense of threat are an effective way of mobilising voters (Dutkiewicz & Kazarinova, 2017; Ötsch & Horacek, 2017), the consideration of the reality or fictitiousness of the enemy does not play an important role. The category of enemies of “the people” is rich indeed (Ižák, 2021). They can be domestic enemies, often members of certain groups, communities, or minorities (national or sexual minorities), and they can be usually “corrupt” government elites (the problem is when representatives of the far right themselves get into the role of executive office holders), they can also be banks, NGOs or the media. The external enemies include, first and foremost, migrants. Migrants are supposed to threaten the nation (people) in different dimensions – personal security, political, economic, or cultural if they are migrants from culturally different regions (Dulebová, Štefančík, & Cingerová, 2024). Apart from migrants, some states or international organizations are presented as enemies, among others. These are, for example, NATO, the WHO, or even the European Union. And it is the EU that is the focus of this text. Presenting a Eurosceptic approach has become one of the basic communication strategies of the far-right across Western Europe (Down & Han, 2021).

This article aims to describe how the relationship of the Slovak far right to the EU has evolved since 2016, the year when the People’s Party Our Slovakia first entered the Slovak Parliament, to the present day, when the Slovak Parliament does not include representatives of the LSNS or the Republic. Still, in the 2024 elections, the representatives of the Republic managed to win two seats in the European Parliament. Given the black-and-white logic of the communication strategies of the far right, I assume that the attitude of the representatives of the far right towards the EU will develop similarly. The EU will be perceived as an enemy, as an organisation that threatens the “national” interests of the sovereign Slovak Republic.

The research is based on discourse analysis, with the corpus consisting of different types of speeches, ranging from statements on social networks to speeches in parliament, to different types of public events where representatives of the far right expressed their views on the EU. I also included representatives of the Slovak National Party in the research sample. Some authors (Haughton, Rybar, & Deegan-Krause, 2021; Kevicky, 2024) classify this party, like LSNS (Ľudová

strana – Naše Slovensko, in English People's Party – Our Slovakia) and Republika (Republic), as a nationalist radical party. Some of the political leaders who ran on the SNS ticket in 2023 had been in politics in previous elections thanks to their cooperation with LSNS (Rudolf Huliak, Tomáš Taraba, Filip Kuffa, Štefan Kuffa). Through discourse analysis, we can explore how meanings, power relations, and social identities are created and reproduced through language. This method allows us to analyse the lexical, stylistic, and other specific features of a text in detail and to formulate relevant conclusions based on them (Cingerová & Dulebová, 2019; Dulebová, Štefančík, & Cingerová, 2024).

Far right. How to define it?

We use the term *far right* to refer to political parties, their representatives, as well as ideologies from the right-wing end of the party-ideological spectrum. These groups often pursue nationalist, authoritarian and xenophobic policies with a strong emphasis on nativism, i.e., prioritizing the protection of the interests and demands of indigenous peoples over those of immigrants (Castro, 2004). Representatives of the far-right style themselves as protectors of the indigenous population from liberalism and Muslim colonists (McMahon, 2021). The far right is characterized by an aggressive form of nationalism, authoritarian tendencies, anti-state rhetoric, and rejection of liberal democratic norms (Mudde, 2007). These movements often emerge in response to social, economic, and political crises and gain the support of individuals who feel alienated from mainstream political parties and institutions. It is in times of crisis that various radical-populist, radical, and even extremist movements gain strength (Holienkova, 2021). Finally, the 2024 European Parliament elections also showed the rise of the far right in some Western European countries. That part of Europe where liberal democracy was supposed to be deeply rooted in the political cultures of the states concerned and was supposed to be virtually unshakable. Far-right actors often reject the principles of liberal democracy, such as individual rights, the rights of national minorities, and equality for members of the LGBTI+ community, but it is also about values such as pluralism, checks and balances on state power, including the important role of opposition political parties. Instead, representatives of the far right may support illiberal forms of democracy or outright authoritarian rule. In Slovakia, several politicians (Andrej Danko and György Gyimesi) have already let it be known that they prefer the principles of illiberal democracy.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that far-right movements are often a reaction to perceived failures of liberal democratic regimes. And it is in this aspect that the danger of far-right ideologies lies. This is because they undermine public confidence in the legitimacy of the processes and institutions of liberal democracy, while authoritarianism actively subverts its principles and practices. These failures may be a consequence of the institutional weaknesses of individual political systems, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe countries. It is precisely these that the German author Klaus von Beyme (2018) refers to when he talks about the so-called “couch parties”. That is to say, parties whose membership fits on a single seat. And it is Slovakia where we have ranked a similar party among the relevant party entities for many years. Although the original OĽaNO, now Slovakia, has expanded its ranks with a few more members, it is still an incomparably small membership base when compared to parties in entrenched democracies. But it is not just the institutional conditions of the political systems of the countries in the region. According to von Beyme, authoritarian traditions and a sense of threat from major powers (von Beyme, 2018), including large organisations, may also be behind the rise in support for the far right. This concept is an appropriate approach to explore the language of the Slovak far right. It was the leaders of the Republic, formerly active in the LSNS, who emphasised their positive relationship with the undemocratic regime of the Slovak Republic from 1939–1945. And they articulate just as strongly their concerns about American policy as they do about the decisions of the EU.

In this text, I use the term far right, not extremism. The authors cannot agree on a precise definition of extremism, and for my reasoning, as well as due to the gradual transformation of the ways of communication of the representatives of the Slovak far right, I prefer a vaguer term that can accommodate multiple perspectives of different authors, who use the term right-wing populism instead of extremism (von Beyme, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Indeed, the problem of which term to use lies in the fact that extremists are generally defined as those who seek to change the existing political order, and the adjective radical is used in the context of those currents and ideologies that do not seek to eliminate certain forms of democratic governance (Golder, 2016). However, if one openly seeks to change the existing political and constitutional order, one risks being banned from action. This is similar to what we have witnessed in the case of the *Slovenská pospolitnosť* – *Národná straa* (Štefančík, 2020). Thus, abandoning the goal of changing the constitutional system may be a precautionary measure on the part of radically inclined politicians against abolition by the judicial branch of power.

The European Union in the communication strategies of the far right

A critical attitude towards the European Union is part of the communication strategies of the Slovak far right in the election campaign (Fraščíková & Demčíšák, 2023; Pavlíková & Krajčovičová, 2023). Of course, criticism of EU processes and institutions is not only typical of the far right; it can also be found among politicians from the democratic centre. However, the difference is visible. While critics of Europe from various parties criticise specific problems of the Union, for example in the areas of democratic decision-making, the economy, finance, or refugee policy, while trying to put forward their proposals for improvement, representatives of the far right fundamentally reject continued European integration. For example, they call for a return to a strong nation-state, advocate the closure of borders to create barriers to migrants and criticise the common European currency. It is not only the EU as an institution that they are critical of. The far-right equally rejects the principles of freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, which are enshrined in the EU treaties.

In the language of the representatives of the Slovak far right, the EU represented one of the central external enemies of the “nation”. Far-right politicians presented the EU as an institution in which Slovakia loses its sovereignty and independence because Slovakia has to take decisions from Brussels. Criticism of EU policy was presented by representatives of the far right with the phrase “dictate from Brussels”. “We will put Slovakia above the dictates of Brussels” was even one of the central slogans of the LSNS before the 2016 elections. By using the phrase ‘dictate from Brussels’, the far right expressed the view that the EU imposes its decisions on the Member States and that they have no way of defending themselves. These decisions are often contrary to the national interests of small Member States.

The ban on the production of conventional light bulbs or mercury thermometers is just a small example of what Brussels is dictating to us (LSNS, 2016).

Brussels keeps forcing more regulations and more immigrants on us. And the standard politicians, bought through the Euro funds we all rely on, obediently do the anti-Brussels bidding (Marian Kotleba, LSNS, 2018).

Brussels keeps forcing more regulations and more immigrants on us. And the standard politicians, bought through the Euro funds we all rely on, obediently carry out the anti-Brussels dictates, and I would focus first and foremost on stopping this madness, this Brussels dictate (Rudolf Huliak, 2023).

In 2016, the LSNS presented in its electoral programme its interest in reintroducing the Slovak crown, initiating a referendum on Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU, and replacing the unilateral orientation towards Western states with a "balanced cooperation with all countries of the world" (Naše Slovensko, 2016a). "Leaving the EU is a question of our survival ... The European Union is a sinking Titanic! The European Union is on the verge of collapse" (Naše Slovensko, 2016b).

One of the important enemies of the nation, according to the representatives of the far right, are supposed to be migrants, especially migrants from Africa and the Middle East. Migration in Slovakia has not been a topic of migration discourse for a long time (Grinaj, 2024; Letavajová, Chlebcová Hečková, & Krno, 2024); it appeared in migration discourse only in 2015. Representatives of the far right have been among the biggest critics of migration. The far-right criticises the EU for its migration policy. The expression 'migrant quotas' was a phrase through which a negative image of the EU could be created in the Slovak public. According to representatives of the far right, the EU was interested in imposing this redistribution mechanism on Slovakia. The LSNS presented the number of migrants that the EU was to impose on the states of Central Europe. Today, we can say that this figure is nowhere near reality. The governments of the Central European states have rejected the compulsory redistribution mechanism, even though migrants from African and Middle Eastern countries have not, as a rule, expressed an interest in long-term residence in a Central European state. This argument is particularly true in the case of the Slovak Republic, where 330 (2015) and 146 (2016) refugees applied for asylum in 2015 and 2016, the period of the strongest migration pressures from these regions (BBFP, 2023). These numbers do not deviate from the long-term average number of foreigners seeking asylum in Slovakia.

Europe is being flooded by an invasion of dangerous immigrants from Africa and Asia. They are attacking, robbing, raping, and murdering the indigenous populations of European countries. Terrorist attacks are the order of the day in Western

EU countries. Yet the EU is inviting more immigrants here. Up to 120 000 of them are to be deployed in Central Europe! (Naše Slovensko, 2016b).

In 2016, the far right also presented the EU as a potential economic risk for Slovakia. For the far right, Slovakia didn't have to be and still is a net recipient of European money. They presented the economic negatives as a reason why Slovakia should leave the EU. The far right presented the EU as an organisation that was against the economic self-sufficiency of nation-states. The ĽSNS concentrated on criticising the Union also for its agricultural policy. Because of the EU, we are to have less good quality food in Slovakia and more poor-quality products imported from abroad.

EU countries are so indebted that their debts will not be repaid even by the great-grandchildren of the current generation. Recently, Slovakia sent €660 million to European rescue funds to bail out bankrupt Greece (Naše Slovensko, 2016b).

The EU prevents us from effectively protecting and supporting domestic producers ... Above all, the EU has destroyed our agriculture and food industry (Naše Slovensko, 2016b).

The Christian character of Slovakia and the liberal character of Western European states should have been other reasons why Slovakia should no longer be part of the EU. Slovak far-right politicians during this period presented homosexuals as perverts and the EU as a community of states that should protect and support this group of people.

The EU is against God and nation ... However, the EU has gradually degenerated into a purely political project whose aim is to destroy the Christian and moral foundations of European states as well as nations (Naše Slovensko, 2016b).

The EU openly supports homosexuals and transsexuals and shows them as role models for young people. It promotes intermarriage between these perverts and gives them children to raise (Naše Slovensko, 2016b).

Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU will put an end to the forcible imposition of pernicious theories such as neo-Marxist secularism, multiculturalism, the gender agenda and LGBTI (Milan Uhrík, ĽSNS, 2016).

For the above reasons, the term European Union has often been preceded in the language of the far right by terms with a dehumanising connotation, such as *rotten*, or *pervverted*. During the election period, the EU was even compared by representatives of the far right to a dungeon of nations, because some smaller nations are unequally placed in comparison with the larger ones. This is the term used in some publications to refer to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in which some nations were equally unequal compared to Hungarians and Austrians. „By this activity, today’s EU (like the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in the past) is slowly but surely becoming a kind of «jailer» of European nations” (LSNS, 2019).

In 2020, a new legislative period of the national parliament began in Slovakia. The beginning of this period was accompanied by the pandemic of COVID-19. The pandemic pushed all other issues into the background, and the Slovak far-right adapted to it. The main topics were linked to criticism of anti-pandemic measures. Despite this fact, the far right’s view of the EU has not changed, and neither has its vocabulary. The far-right continued to use the phrase ‘the dictates of Brussels’ to emphasise the EU’s superior position over small nation-states, including Slovakia:

The right of nation states is more than the dictates of Brussels! (R. Schlossár, NRSR, 11.10.2021).

Our government is forcing us to stay in the European Union, in the Brussels dictatorship that is crushing our nation (Marian Kotleba, YouTube, 18.11.2021).

The problem of the far right, however, has been mainly one of internal cleavage. Several prominent people left the LSNS after intra-party disagreements and later formed a new party entity, Republika. The LSNS gradually declined in preferences, while the Republika party did well in opinion polls. However, the national parliamentary elections in September 2023 eventually not only knocked the LSNS out of parliament, but also the Republika failed to reach the five percent quorum. However, some former LSNS nominees did make it into parliament and eventually into the government, this time on the Slovak National Party’s ticket.

The Republic Party has presented the EU as an organisation that is “destroying Europe”. In particular, it is environmental policy and immigration policy that are to hurt nation-states. In its election programme (Republika, 2023), Republika does not reject Slovakia’s membership of the EU, it does not see it only negatively. On the contrary, the party is positive about the economic aspects of cooperation between member states. The Republika’s criticism is mainly directed at the political

dimension of the EU. The Republika proposes to reform the EU, and in case of failure of the EU reforms, the Republika proposes Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU.

Before the elections to the National Assembly and before the Euro elections, the Republic Party expressed the demand to reform the European Union to return the Union to an economic community without political integration.

The European Parliament is really full of nonsense, lots of curiosities and, above all, it is a huge colossus, a huge bureaucracy. Every single one of these windows is full of officials who often have nothing to do and therefore invent nonsense that is detrimental to the whole of Europe. These are the things that we want to stop. To get this European Union back to what it was designed to be. That is to say, to economic cooperation and not to have officials ruining our lives with their nonsense (Milan Uhrík, Republika, 2024b).

Even before the European Parliament elections, the Republic was extremely critical of the EU, returning to the traditional theme of Slovak populists – migrants – but also emphasising some topics that would not be articulated by other political parties. In their arguments, they use misleading assumptions that have nothing to do with reality.

No more crazy ideas from Brussels! No more hurting our farmers, no more pregnant men, no more third sexes, no more mandatory quotas for immigrants (Republika, 2024a).

An updated rainbow flag that incorporates the new, reinvented genders, so this is the real Brussels (Milan Uhrík, Republika, 2024b).

New EU regulation: we must grow thistles instead of wheat (Milan Uhrík, Facebook, 2024).

The Republic Party continues to criticise the EU for its economic and political decisions, but it uses different language than before and immediately after the entry of the ĽSNS into the national parliament in 2016. To a significantly lesser extent, representatives of the far right use pejorative terms to refer to political opponents, and it does not use language reminiscent of that of the German National Socialists.

Conclusion

This article presents the views of the Slovak far right on the EU and European integration. It looks at three electoral periods from 2016 to the present. The LSNS presented the EU in an extremely negative light immediately before entering the national parliament in 2016 and during the first legislative period. It presented its negative view of the EU mainly on four levels: political, security, economic, and cultural-ethical.

On the first level – political – the LSNS presented the EU as a community in which the Slovak Republic as a small state was losing its sovereignty. The EU is supposed to be a community of states that does not consider the interests of small nation-states but primarily pursues the interests of the big European powers. The loss of Slovakia's sovereignty is to occur through various directives and regulations that Slovakia must implement in its legal system. The EU's migration policy is supposed to be one example of how Slovakia can lose its national sovereignty in terms of who it will and will not allow into its territory.

The EU's migration policy also touches on the second dimension of the Slovak far-right's approach to the EU. The EU, through its liberal approach to aiding refugees, is supposed to cause large waves of migration, the consequence of which is the loss of security for the indigenous population. Migrants are often presented as a security threat in the communication strategies of the far right (Štefančík, 2020).

On the cultural-ethical level, the Slovak far-right presents the EU as an organisation that puts pressure on Slovakia to adopt the cultural-ethical standards of Western European states. This concerns, in particular, the status of members of sexual minorities. The far-right, however, presents an extremely negative attitude towards homosexuals. Homosexuals have been called various derogatory terms by members of the far-right, even reminiscent of the communication of the German Nazis of the 1930s and 1940s.

Finally, membership in the EU is presented by Slovak far-right politicians as a disadvantage in economic terms as well. Slovakia is to lose funding, the EU is to hinder the food self-sufficiency of the Member States, and membership of the EU also has an extremely negative impact on the Slovak agricultural sector.

In contrast to the previous period, the far right is currently cautious in formulating Slovakia's future position in the EU. Today, the far right presents the idea of reforming the EU to deepen economic cooperation between member states

but minimise political integration. It criticises the EU for various economic and political decisions. It is particularly critical of the EU for the economic sanctions it has imposed on Russia for starting a war in Ukraine. However, in comparison with previous periods, the leaders of the Republic Party are doing so in more acceptable language.

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Unia Europejska w języku skrajnej prawicy słowackiej

STRESZCZENIE Artykuł analizuje strategie komunikacyjne przedstawicieli skrajnej prawicy w perspektywie diachronicznej. Celem jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób skrajna prawica reprezentowała członkostwo Słowacji w Unii Europejskiej, jakich narracji i argumentów używała oraz jakie tematy podkreślała. Wychodzę z założenia, że skrajna prawica przedstawia UE jako jednego z wrogów „narodu” Słowaków. Swoje wnioski formułuję poprzez analizę dyskursu. Korpus obejmuje różne rodzaje przemówień, od wypowiedzi w mediach społecznościowych, przez przemówienia w parlamencie, po wydarzenia publiczne, podczas których przedstawiciele skrajnej prawicy wyrażali swoje poglądy na temat UE. Na podstawie porównania diachronicznego możemy stwierdzić, że w 2016 r., kiedy ESNS po raz pierwszy weszła do parlamentu, partia ta opowiadała się za wyjściem Słowacji z UE. Po dwóch kadencjach w parlamencie krajowym i zdobyciu mandatów w Parlamencie Europejskim nowa skrajnie prawicowa Partia Republikańska naciska na reformę UE, aby wzmocnić współpracę gospodarczą między państwami członkowskimi i zminimalizować integrację polityczną. Mimo zmiany poglądów na temat UE przedstawiciele skrajnej prawicy słowackiej przedstawiają ją głównie w negatywnym świetle.

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