

SOLUTION OF ROMA ISSUE BY SLOVAK FAR RIGHT PARTIES IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2016

Pavol Struhár¹

¹*Pavol Struhár, Department of Political Science, Alexander Dubček University of Trenčín, Študentská 2, 911 50, Trenčín
Corresponding author E-mail address: pavol.struhar@tuni.sk*

Abstract

The paper deals with Slovak far right political parties and their suggested solutions of Roma issue in parliamentary elections 2016. Two relevant parties are analysed - "The Slovak National Party" (SNS) and "Kotleba – People's party Our Slovakia" (LSNS). The paper examines and compares the electoral manifestos 2012 and 2016 and also official expressions of party's leaders on their official websites or social network profiles. As concluded, there is a significant difference between campaign of SNS in 2012 and 2016, as the party has changed their aggressive rhetoric against Roma people and actually does not offer any radical ideas or proposals in this matter. On the other side, LSNS keeps in using anti-Roma agenda in their campaigns; it does not refine the rhetoric or radical ideas and proposals. These findings help to understand the difference between two main far right parties in the Slovak republic and explain the different motivations of their voters.

Keywords: Kotleba – People's party Our Slovakia, Slovak National Party, Roma issue, parliamentary elections, far right

1 Introduction

The results of elections to the National Council of the Slovak republic indicate the success of far right parties. After four years without any seats, in 2016 the radical right-wing Slovak National party (SNS) managed to enter the parliament with support of 225 386 voters (8,64%) and filled 15 seats. More surprisingly, almost 210 000 voters casted their vote to extreme right party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), named after its leader Marian Kotleba. This party with connections to neo-Nazi scene gained 14 deputies in the National Council. We can explain the voters' decision as frustration caused by their social situation and incompetent politicians, rather than the support of some form of extremism (e.g. fascism or neo-Nazism).¹ However, these parties many years openly present their radical ideas, mainly in relation with the Roma issue (Klukkanavská 2012, Smolík 2013). This is not surprising, nativism as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia is believed to be one of the crucial ideological features of far right parties (both extreme and radical) (Mudde 2007). SNS and LSNS often use this topic to mobilize voters who are either directly affected by the criminality of some Romani or disagree with quality of the social system, which is – according to them – exploited by Romani with no moral entitlement to any kind of social aid.

That is why the aim of this paper is to analyze the ideological background and proposals concerning Roma issue introduced by these two main and actually very successful far right parties.² We used various data, but we primarily aimed at electoral manifestos of both parties from 2012 and 2016. To increase the validity of the results³, information from manifestos is confronted with party's releases put out on their own websites or social network profiles. Findings will be also compared with their campaign before parliamentary elections in 2012 to outline the trends within these parties.

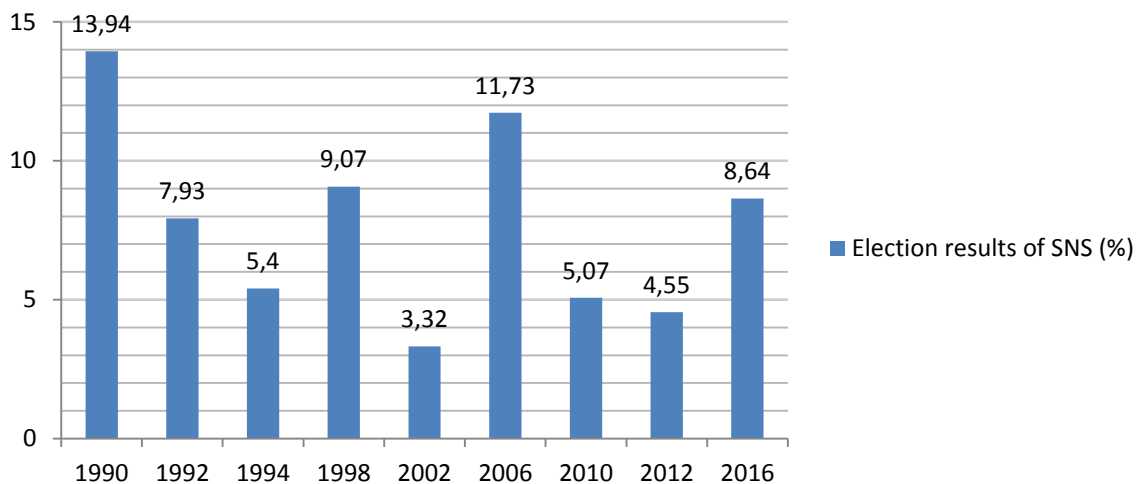
2 Slovak National Party

The Slovak National Party (SNS) arose on 7 March 1990 as one of the oldest parties in Slovak party system after 1989 (Konečný&Zetochová 2005). Its party manifesto refers to ideals, principles and values of Slovak National party acting from 1871 to 1938 (SNS 2016). The party usually managed to enter the parliament, only two times (in 2002 and 2012) remained out of parliament (Figure 1), mostly due to internal conflicts which led to several splits. Moreover, the party was a member of coalition government four times since 1989.

¹ However, the research by Ladislav Macháček (2013), carried out in 2012, showed a high level of consent with far right ideas (71%) within the population.

² Our original aim was to analyze all the far right parties who participated on elections. But the party „Coalition Together for Slovakia“ obtained only 1777 votes (0,06%) and the party „Bravery – Big national and pro-russian coalition“ received just the support of 3428 voters (0,13%). Therefore, the analysis of their program would not help to understand or explain the nature of far right politics in the Slovak republic.

³ Electoral manifestos are often very vague and deceptive. Moreover, far right parties and representatives has often also hidden agenda, the program which is not official to avoid the intervention of police or legal authorities.

Figure 1 - Election results of SNS - parliamentary elections (%)

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak republic, SME

The party identifies itself as a centre-right, conservative and national political party based on Euro-christian value system (SNS 2016). However, SNS is considered to be a far right party by most of Slovak and Czech authors (Bušša 2013, Malová 2003, Marušiak 2015, Kluknavská 2012, Smolík 2013, etc.), although its nationalism has had more expressions through the history of the party. Kluknavská (2012) asserts that in early 90s the party gave the priority to independence of the Slovak republic from common state of Czechs and Slovaks. Since 1994 the nationalism of the party has lain on its hostility against the Hungarian, Romani or other marginalized minorities.⁴

This was also the case of campaign before parliamentary elections in 2012. The party reacted to prejudices against Roma people among majority population. The most elaborated part of the whole SNS's electoral manifesto was dedicated to Roma issues, although the party used the pejorative term „Gypsy problem“ what indicate the negative perception of this community. They offered some radical and restrictive proposals, e.g. establishment of boarding schools for „children of maladjusted parents“ or criminal liability of persons who build or live in illegal buildings (Kluknavská 2012). Their ideas and proposals were supported by billboards portraying either tattooed Roma man as an unemployed man who exploits the social system or devastated houses inhabited by Roma people.

Nevertheless, this campaign did not help SNS to enter the parliament. In response to this failure, the Slovak national party has changed not just the leader of the party, but also its style of communication and program priorities. The party has not directly referred to Roma issue in their official statement since 2014. The Program Principles of Kosice, one of the most important program documents of the party (adopted in 2015), does not mention Romani people or people from marginalized communities. In a similar way, there is just minimal attention paid to Roma issue in campaign before parliamentary elections 2016. In contrast to other far right organizations electoral manifesto does not feature any pejorative or xenophobic term naming Romani people. The party does not even explicitly mention this ethnic group in whole document whether in positive or negative way.⁵ However, authors of this manifesto present the tools to solve the problem of marginalized groups instead. The context of these proposals indicates it is mostly intended for Romani people living in poverty and social exclusion. Their proposals are very similar to ideas of other mainstream parties. For example, they suggest deeper involvement of non-governmental organizations, obligatory pre-school education for children from age of five or implementation of alternative punishments in case of wrongdoer's insolvency. This change of policy was accompanied by new strategy of communication with public. Billboards with strong anti-Roma sentiment and abrasive manners of former leader Ján Slota were replaced by slogan „proudly, professionally, decently“. The Slovak National Party, as a member of coalition government since 2016, does not even press any proposal regarding Roma issues to the Program Declaration of the SR Government of 2016.

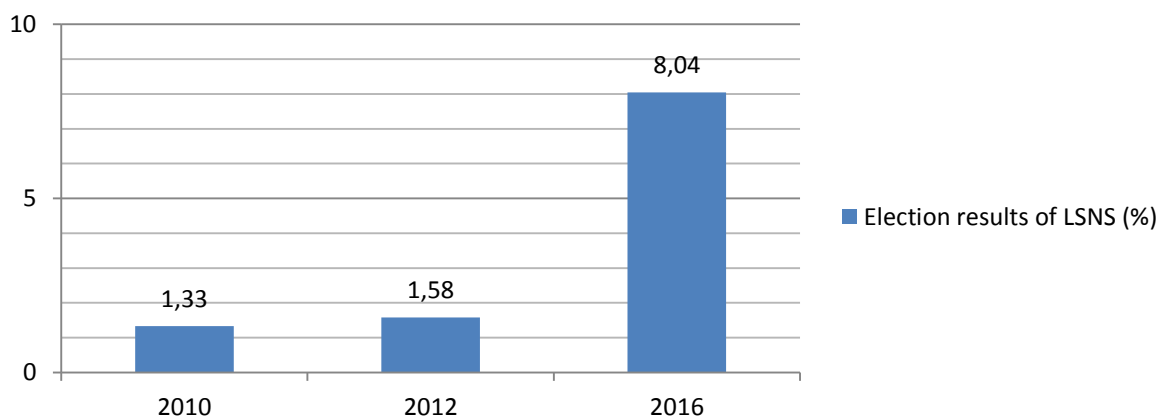
⁴ With the entry of the Slovak republic to the European Union (in 2004) SNS introduced a new priority of its political program – defense of Slovak national sovereignty in the EU.

⁵ However, it is important to note that the Roma issue can constitute a hidden agenda of the party ready to be used officially anytime the party decides.

3 Kotleba- People's party Our Slovakia (LSNS)

As the name of the party indicates, it is organized on the basis of leader principle (*Führerprinzip*). Marian Kotleba has the strongest position not only within the party but also among sympathizers and voters⁶. Juraj Marušiak (2015) asserts, that „*Marian Kotleba is the prime example of a successful transformation of an extremist with far-right roots into a successful populist politician*”. Under specific economic and political circumstances, he has managed to transform the marginal political subject to the successful party, which won 14 mandates in the National Council of the Slovak republic in 2016 (Figure 2). In preferential voting, Marian Kotleba gained 74,5% of total votes cast for the party.

Figure 2 - Election results of LSNS - parliamentary elections (%)



Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak republic

According to many authors (e.g. Nociar 2012 or Marušiak 2015:38) quoting official sources, LSNS, established in 2010, described itself as a „*political party based on (1) national and Christian traditions and values, with the main objective to restore the Slovak Republic's national character, and (2) a legal and socially just state, based on the principles of direct democracy and absolute freedom of thought*”.

However, the party is often defined as an extremist, fascist or neo-Nazi. According to Nociar (2012) and Kluknavská (2012), the party's ideological features include antiziganism, social chauvinism, paternalism or emphasis on law and order. The party refuses the membership of the Slovak republic in EU or NATO and criticizes the current political establishment and its representatives for corruption and nepotism. Many authors (e.g. Kluknavská 2012, Gurňák&Mikuš 2012, Nociar 2012, Smolík 2013) agree that Roma issue belongs to the main topics of the party. According to Nociar (2012), „*using an anti-Roma agenda appears to be successful and effective and has resulted in an increase in popularity and media coverage*”⁷. The party calls the Roma „*social parasites*” or misleading as „*gypsy extremists*”. The former term should persuade the potential voters that Roma people exploit the social system and the latter desensitizes and relativizes the term extremism used by state institutions. In campaign before parliamentary elections 2012 they suggested to make the legal and prison system stricter to eliminate the criminality of people, motivate them to work and behave decently. In other official sources⁸, they defended this proposal using the example of „*gypsy extremists*” committing crimes as rape, thefts, brutal assaults or even murders. Another proposal is to establish the home guards, which should – according to LSNS - protect the property and health of decent people from crimes of „*gypsy extremists*”. (Kluknavská 2012).

From the electoral manifesto 2016 implies that the anti-Roma agenda remains one of the main topics in LSNS campaign⁹. The party offers solutions to almost every area of the society (e.g. health, environment, army or agriculture), the Roma issue seems to be crucial for improving the situation in social care and safety of

⁶ In parliamentary elections 2016 he personally received (in preferential voting) more than 70% of party's votes.

⁷ Statistical analysis of Gurňák and Mikuš (2012) shows a high correlation between the representation of Roma ethnic group and voting for LSNS.

⁸ Because it is forbidden by law to attack the members of any ethnic group, their official program is formulated in moderate manner. The real meaning of individual proposals is explained unofficially in various documents, interviews or meetings.

⁹ In comparison with elections 2012 the greater emphasize in recent elections is placed on opposition to immigrants and thus to EU. Hostility to political elites and parliamentary political parties still remains on high level and serves as an important incentive for LSNS voter's mobilization.

citizens. From a security perspective, the party plans to solve the problems with „parasites in settlements“ and „protect the people against the growing gypsy terror“. In case of social policy, they offer restriction on social aid to Romani people as „they do not work and get everything for free“. (Naše Slovensko 2016). The program was backed by Kotleba's expressions in political debates, when he often used the dichotomy “decent working people – social parasites” or warm people of gypsy criminality growth.

4 Conclusion

The analysis of electoral manifestos and expressions of two successful far right parties in parliamentary elections 2016 shows one significant difference in using the Roma issue in their campaigns. The Slovak National Party has changed its policy recently and abandoned the anti-Roma strategy used many years before. The party does not mention the Roma issue in their 49-page electoral manifesto of 2016. The last article related to Roma issue was published yet in year 2014¹⁰. Although it is disputatious if it is right to ignore the Roma issue in their policies, it is significant that the party does not behave as a standard far right party in this matter.

On the other side, Kotleba – People's party Our Slovakia keeps in using anti-Roma agenda as their main electoral topic and strategy instrument. The electoral manifesto 2016 repeats restrictive and rough proposals against the Romani people from the similar documents in year 2010 and 2012. Together with hostility to immigrants and politicians, Roma issue remains the strongest mobilization issue used by leader of this party in debates and meetings. The party even organizes protests and marches against „gypsy criminality“ to prove their resolution to protect „decent citizens“.

These findings constitute a helpful background for other analyses and researches dealing with phenomenon of LSNS success in parliamentary elections 2016 or with various themes related to radicalism and extremism, for example, voting behavior, framing of far right discourse or strategical and ideological changes in far right politics.

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¹⁰ Moreover, one of SNS's former vice-presidents, Rafael Rafaj, known for his xenophobic attitudes to Roma, was not reelected to party leadership in 2014. He actually does not represent this party in public.