

ATTITUDES OF SYMPATHIZERS OF SELECTED POLITICAL PARTIES ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AXIS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the positioning of supporters of political parties in Slovakia on the socio-economic axis in 2019, immediately after the European Parliament elections. In terms of method we employ secondary analysis of the dataset from the European Parliament Election Study 2019, focusing on Slovak respondents, who expressed they feel close to specific political parties in Slovakia. We then analyse positions of the party sympathizers in socio-economic issues, creating a position on socioeconomic scale for each of them and try to explain their coalition – opposition relationships in relation to it. We argue, that both coalition governments – the one in 2016-2020 and the new one since the March 2020 are ideologically compact in terms of socio-economic positions of their sympathizers. The first one contained parties with the most socialist oriented sympathizers and the second one contains parties with the most pro-market oriented sympathizers in their respective parliaments.

Keywords: socio-economic axis, party sympathizers, left, right.

1 Introduction

In this article, we will focus on the positioning of supporters of political parties in Slovakia on the socio-economic axis in 2019, immediately after the European Parliament elections. This is somewhat different from the positioning on general left-right axis. It is also fully independent from placement on the libertarianism-authoritarianism axis, which is at least equally important for the ideological identification of parties in Slovakia. Nor will we focus on the party positions in terms of foreign policy orientation and European integration issues. We will deal with the average attitudes of voters who expressed proximity to particular political parties, not with the attitude of the political parties themselves. However, it can be assumed that at least in the longer term perspective, there is a certain relationship between the attitudes of parties and their voters and that these two phenomena influence each other. This assumption is supported by data from older party surveys such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 2014 and 2017 as they are analyzed by Bušša (2019).

Contrary to researches concerned with the attitudes of political parties, which are either expert estimates based on party activities or analyses of party program documents, attitudes of party sympathizers are much less reliable as they depend on correct interpretation of questions by the randomly selected respondents. Their ability to correctly understand often quite specific issues may be limited. Also, their subjective perception of one's own relative positions may be distorted, especially in anti-system parties.

Despite these limitations, this is important data for further analysis of the party system and its characteristics. Party position on the socio-economic axis is a valuable information for analyzing the electoral success of individual parties. The ideological proximity or distance between parties allows us to better understand their decisions in coalition negotiations as well as to estimate the unity of the coalition government in economic decisions. We will argue, that both coalition governments in 2016-2020 and the new one since the March 2020 are ideologically compact in terms of socio-economic positions of their sympathizers. The first one contained parties with the most socialist oriented sympathizers and the second one contains parties with the most pro-market oriented sympathizers in their respective parliaments.

2 Political parties included

The European Parliament Election Study 2019 (Schmitt et al. 2019) took place right after the May 2019 European Parliament Election, so just some of the current political parties were already included in it. The most notable party not included in it is ZA ĽUDÍ, which did get into the Parliament and the Government after the February 2020 election. Each country included in the Study had limited number of political parties included¹. Out of these, SNS, MOST – HÍD, PS/SPOLU, and the KDH did not get to the Parliament but we are including them among our data.

¹ In Slovakia these were: MOST – HÍD, Koalícia Progresívne Slovensko / SPOLU - občianska demokracia (PS/SPOLU), Kotlebovci - Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS), Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH), SME RODINA, SMER - sociálna demokracia (SMER - SD), Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS), OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti, NOVA, Kresťanská únia, ZMENA ZDOLA (OĽaNO), Slovenská národná strana (SNS)

Relatively large number of respondents expressed they did not feel close to any of the mentioned parties. This means that we could not ascribe the ideological positions of those voters to any party, just to Slovak society as a whole. This does reflect the fact that many Slovak voters do not feel close to any party, but it does not much help to make our findings more precise and informative. In total, a random sample of one thousand respondents from Slovakia took part in the study, making it relatively representative of the entire population. It would however be problematic to say that these are still the positions of the party sympathizers today, because there may have been significant changes since the data collection, especially during the election campaign.

3 State regulation and control of the economy

Unfortunately only few questions about ideological position of respondents were included in the interview. Even fewer concerned economic policies. Fortunately, all of the questions use the same 11-point scale and in all of them the fully socialist or leftist position are represented by the value 0, while the fully free market or rightist position are represented by the value 10. This makes the values easier to compare and even to combine the values from individual questions into a composite value for each party, as we can see in the table 4.

The first question, as shown in table 1, asks about the opinion on state regulation and control of the economy. It shows that the spread of values among sympathizers of different parties is relatively limited – between 3,3 and 5,9. It also shows that all Slovak voters express relatively socialist opinions. Only two parties have sympathizers preferring the pro-market attitude over socialist one – SaS and PS/SPOLU – and even these were quite moderate. Sympathizers of all the other parties were more in favor of state regulation and control of the economy, SMER – SD being the most socialist, followed closely by its then coalition partners SNS and MOST – HÍD.

From the point of view of the coalition – opposition relations, these values show that the 2016-2020 coalition really was left wing in the sense that its parties were close to prevalently left leaning voters. By 2019, all the members of the former coalition had sympathizers, which were most left leaning than those of any other party. On the other hand, all the then opposition parties, which in 2020 got to the parliament and became members of the new coalition government had sympathizers with the most pro-market attitudes. From that point of view, the right wing opposition triumphed over the left wing government. But the situation is less clear when we consider values relative to the center of the scale. Sympathizers of OLaNO averaged just below the middle value with 4,9 and those of SME RODINA averaged even lower with 4,7. This suggests that even the new coalition government is more centrist than pro-market, from the point of view of values of their sympathizers in 2019.

In the middle between these two blocs were sympathizers of the extreme right KĽSNS, which confirms that the party is not defined by its position on the socio-economic axis, but rather on libertarianism – authoritarianism axis as we have shown in Bušša (2019). Even more in favor of state regulation however were the sympathizers of non-parliamentary KDH. This shows that KDH also is somewhat different in its values from other parties, considered right wing in Slovakia. KDH is also significantly authoritarian.

Table 1 Average answers of party sympathizers to question what do you think of state regulation and control of the economy (0 = fully in favor of state intervention in the economy; 10 = fully opposed of state intervention in the economy)

Sympathizer of:	Position on state regulation and control of the economy
SMER - SD	3,3
SNS*	3,8
MOST – HÍD *	3,9
KDH*	4,2
KĽSNS	4,7
SME RODINA**	4,7
OLaNO**	4,9
PS/SPOLU*	5,5
SaS**	5,9

Source: The European Parliament Election Study 2019 (Schmitt et al. 2019), calculations made by the author

Note: *the party did not get to the parliament in 2020 election; **the party became a member of the coalition government after 2020

4 Redistribution of wealth

The second question, shown in table 2, was concerning redistribution of wealth in the society from the rich to the poor. The results were similar to those in the first question. The spread of values was still quite limited although slightly higher. Sympathizers of the SaS were the only ones who in average were clearly against redistributive economic policies with 6,3 average, while sympathizers of PS/SPOLU positioned themselves in the middle of the scale. Sympathizers of the rest of the parties were more or less in favor of redistribution of

wealth to the poor, all coalition parties scoring 3,4. They were followed by KĽSNS with 3,5 and OĽaNO with 3,9.

The coalition – opposition divide is clearly visible in this case as well. All the sympathizers of the former coalition government were the most in favor of state intervention in the economy, while sympathizers of the new government parties were the most against it. In both tables 1 and 2 the values suggest, that had the PS/SPOLU gotten into the parliament, it would have probably ended up in the coalition government. In both cases average scores of its sympathizers are right in the middle of the coalition group. And so were the sympathizers of KDH in this case. Once again, the sympathizers of KĽSNS had a score between the values of former and current coalition government parties, although in this case it was very close to the values of coalition parties.

Table 2 Average answers of party sympathizers concerning redistribution of wealth (0 = fully in favor of redistribution from the rich to the poor in Slovakia; 10 = fully opposed of redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor in Slovakia)

Sympathizer of:	Position on redistribution of wealth
SMER - SD	3,4
SNS*	3,4
MOST – HÍD *	3,4
KĽSNS	3,5
OĽaNO**	3,9
SME RODINA**	4,2
KDH*	4,6
PS/SPOLU*	5,0
SaS**	6,3

Source: The European Parliament Election Study 2019 (Schmitt et al. 2019), calculations made by the author

Note: *the party did not get to the parliament in 2020 election; **the party became a member of the coalition government after 2020

5 Self-positioning on the left-right axis

We included the question about the general self-positioning on the left-right axis to compare it with the self-positioning on economic issues. As we mentioned earlier, the socio-economic axis and the general left - right axis are not identical in case of Slovakia. It is quite visible in case of KDH sympathizers, who considered themselves to be on the right wing of the political spectrum, while expressing socialist positions in both previous socio-economic questions. Also the KĽSNS sympathizers positioned themselves to the right, although they favored socialist policies, as did sympathizers of OĽaNO and SME RODINA. In all four cases the difference can be explained by looking at their position at the libertarianism – authoritarianism axis on which they are either relatively authoritarian in case of OĽaNO sympathizers, or strongly authoritarian in case of KDH, SME RODINA and KĽSNS. MOST – HÍD sympathizers still identified as relatively centrist, scoring 4,7 points in average. This party also used to be considered a part of the Slovak right wing before entering a coalition government with SMER – SD in 2016.

Table 3 Average answers of party sympathizers to the question about their position on 11-point scale between "the left" and "the right" in political matters (0 = "left"; 10 = "right,")

Sympathizer of:	Position between "the left" and "the right"
SMER - SD	3,2
SNS*	3,8
MOST – HÍD *	4,7
SME RODINA**	5,3
PS SPOLU*	5,5
Kotlebovci - ĽSNS	5,6
OĽaNO**	5,6
SaS**	6,8
KDH*	6,9

Source: The European Parliament Election Study 2019 (Schmitt et al. 2019), calculations made by the author

Note: *the party did not get to the parliament in 2020 election; **the party became a member of the coalition government after 2020

6 Conclusion

In the paper we conducted a secondary analysis the European Parliament Election Study 2019 dataset in order to gain data on self-positioning of sympathizers of Slovak political parties on the socio-economic scale. Defining a position for sympathizers of nine relevant political parties in Slovakia, we found that majority of them are leaning towards socialist policies, even among the parties considered to be part of the right wing in the Slovak politics. Nevertheless we still can say that political conflict can be framed in terms of different approaches to socio-economic policies. Sympathizers of all parties of the former coalition government preferred more socialist policies than sympathizers of any other surveyed party in 2019. And in reverse, sympathizers of all parties of the new coalition government preferred more pro-market policies than sympathizers of any other surveyed party in 2019. The 2020 election did bring change from socio-economic point of view - from parties close to prevalently socialist oriented voters to parties close to centrist voters ranging from moderate socialists to moderately pro-market oriented voters.

7 References

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