CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract
This paper attempts to evaluate contemporary political radicalism and extremism in Slovakia. In order to do so, it first tries to clarify the definition of each of these concepts and states the criteria, that radical and extremist political subjects should meet. Further it deals with the relationship between democratic political regime and anti-system parties and with the issue of legal political activity of anti-system political subjects. Finally it considers three approaches to research and counting of radical and extremist political parties and presents an overview of contemporary radical and extremist political parties in Slovakia.

Keywords: radical, extreme, left, right, anti-system

1 Introduction

There is a general agreement among political scientists, that terms radicalism and extremism are used as interchangeable in public discourse these days. A great part of blame for that falls on mass media, that have a tendency to overstate in order to get attention. This leads them to use terms extreme left and extreme right even when referring to political subjects that do not fall into the category. The public, then, is unclear about the terminology - a problem that needs to be dealt with by anyone who attempts to seriously research radical and extremist patterns in Slovakia.

For the purpose of this article it is useful to state, what criteria political subjects should meet in order to be considered a part of radical left/right and what criteria should they meet to be considered a part of extreme left/right. As Učeň (2007) and Struhár (2011) say, extreme right/left parties are differing from radical right/left ones by the presence of anti-system element in the former. That means that extreme right/left parties have a goal to fundamentally change the standing political system in the country.

Radical political subjects are differing from the political mainstream more by the methods they use to reach their goals, than by the goals them selves. They are characterised by desire for rapid and unconditional repair of unwanted elements of political system while leaving the system itself intact. They attempt to reform, not replace the political system.

While these definitions are offering us some guidelines to distinguish between the two groups of political subjects, they are still rather unclear when it comes to classifying real life political parties. Where exactly is the border between fundamental change of political system on one hand and unconditional repair of its unwanted elements on the other is often unclear.

2 Democracy and different opinion

The question which opinions should be permitted within democratic public discourse is a surprisingly conflictual subject. Based on its own definition - democracy should be a free competition of ideas without any preferences or limits. That is a strength and a weakness at the same time.

Democracy, unlike any other political regime, should enable its own termination by legal and legitimate means – by the victory of alternative political idea in free election. In a way, that is how communists in Czechoslovakia took over. A democratic regime allowed its own dismantling and destruction of many of its values without a fight. Why would it do that? The answer lies in a unique strength of democratic regime.

Democracy does not see opposing political ideas as conspirational but as a part of public discourse leading to creation of general will. While authoritarian or totalitarian regimes suppress the opposition, democratic regimes recognise the right of opposition to compete for power. That takes away some of the appeal that opposition against any regime usually has. By letting extreme left/right parties compete with the others and even enter the government coalition, democratic regime decreases their dangerousness by incorporating opposition into the government. Thus the opposition is ether compromised by collaboration, or by fighting against fairly inclusive system.

This, however, is not as common feature of Western democracies as one would expect. Countries that would be called democratic without hesitation often do not allow some sort of opposition parties to formally exist or to

compete in election. In case of Slovakia those are the parties that would violate the prohibition of following activities: support and incitement of groups leading towards national, racial, religious and ethnic hatred, restricting of basic rights and freedoms, production, dissemination or harbouring of extremist ideas and defamation of nation, race and conviction.

As we can see, this almost exclusively concerns extreme right, where many political subjects and groups must take into account, that presenting some of their ideas publicly may affect their legal status. On the other hand political subjects of extreme left are only marginally affected and may present their political ideas without fear of legal penalty. This corresponds with general sentiment in society towards extreme right and extreme left (Bastl, Mareš, Smolík, Vejvodová, 2012). While extreme right is often associated with violence and seen as a threat, extreme left is sometimes presented in media as idealistic and utopian.

3   Methodology

From the methodological point of view, there can be three different approaches to the research of radical and extreme left and right in Slovakia. Each has its advantages and shortcomings and each would lead to partially different findings. The first - and the most obvious - is to look at all the relevant political subjects from ideological point of view and identify those that meet the criteria of radical and extreme left/right. The advantage is concentration on the relevant parties and ignoring all those that do not matter. Such approach avoids overestimating of extreme and radical political forces, that do exist but their overall impact on party system is unimportant.

The second approach would be relying purely on the ideological criterion regardless of political relevance of the political subjects. The advantage would be better understanding of ideological roots, affiliations and shifts of political subjects and groups.

The third approach is to concentrate of the illegal activities and society threatening behaviour of the radical and extreme right/left. It must rely on the data of security forces and is therefore less reliable than the others. On the other hand it could be able to identify some politically low profile, but socially dangerous and ideologically extreme political forces. As we noted above, not every political ideology can present itself openly. The more extreme it is the higher probability of acting in secret. Since these approaches are complementary, we could try to combine them and create a complex layout of radical and extreme political subjects and groups in Slovakia.

4   Relevant political parties

The first approach gives us an overview of relevant political parties in Slovak party system. Classical distinguishing criterion of relevant political subjects by Sartori (1976) says that for a party to be counted as relevant, it has to have either coalition or blackmail potential. In case of Slovakia that means that relevant party should be able to either get into the parliament or to attract significant part of voters of parties that do. If we use this criterion on the past three election cycles, we can identify five relevant radical or extreme political subjects in our party system: Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS), Slovenská národná strana (SNS), Národ a Spravodlivosť – naša strana (NaS – ns) and Združenie robotníkov Slovenska (ZRS) and Komunistická strana Slovenska (KSS).

5   Slovak radical right

Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party) is perhaps the most obvious example of radical right in Slovakia. The party is one of the oldest relevant parties in Slovak politics. It has quite stable support among voters although it occasionally does not suffice to get SNS past the 5% quorum. The party even survived repeated change of party leadership – something that few political in Slovakia managed to do.

Although it is usually the furthermost right wing party in parliament, it was never in a right wing coalition. Therefore its economic program contains calls for strong state protective of common people and some socially disadvantaged groups (SNS, 2012).

What really ties it to the radical right are the mainly nationalism and xenophobia, tendency to create mythologised national history to advocate tough position against Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Occasionally it leads to racist appeals, most famously by the former chairman Ján Slota (Slota prirovnal Kingu Gönczovú k Hitlerovi, 2008). SNS also strongly refuses multiculturalism, makes generalisations about Roma population that it has parasitic lifestyle on expense of the majority population and it uses the stereotype of so called village Gypsies. It calls for immediate and decisive action to stop this asocial parasitic behavior even by strict actions of the state against the Roma people (SNS, 2012).

Even though SNS at times expressed positive attitude towards wartime Slovak Republic and its leading figures, it clearly refuses Nazism and holocaust. It does not have anti-system appeals and therefore can not be seen as extreme right. It supports democratic regime and political plurality.

Národ a Spravodlivosť – naša strana (Nation and Justice – Our Party) is relatively new party created by former members of SNS. This origin is clearly visible on the ideological profile of NaS – ns. So far it was not successful in attracting larger amount of voters, however it managed to take enough voters from SNS to keep it out of parliament in the last election. Its program is anti-liberal, etatist and calls for immediate and radical solution of „problem with Gypsies"(19, NaS – ns), it alarms voters that deeds of Gypsies already have first victims.

6   Slovak radical left

It is questionable whether this category even has some parties to be filled with. There are just two political subjects – both on the border relevancy: KSS and ZRS. In the last parliamentary election, candidates of both these parties shared the list of KSS.

Komunistická strana Slovenska (Communist Party of Slovakia) is – despite the identical name – organisationally different from the former regime-party. However it claims to be its ideological successor. Again, it is not true. This KSS does not attempt to establish dictatorship of the proletariat, just to bring about a radical reform of capitalist economy. It makes KSS part of radical, rather then extreme left. It is relying on the symbols of the former regime and calculates with nostalgia after the good aspects of Marxist regime among its voters.

Združenie robotníkov Slovenska (Association of Workers in Slovakia) is building its ideological positions on strong critique of post-revolutionary capitalism and all its disadvantages. It is a distinctly populist party presenting itself as defender of interests of simple common people from corrupted and distanced political and economic elites. ZRS demands deep revision of economic and political sphere. Its has been largely irrelevant last couple of years.

7   Extreme Right in Slovakia

Ľudová strana – Naše Slovensko (People's Party – Our Slovakia) is currently the only relevant anti-system party in Slovakia. Its election results are relatively stable and even though they do not give the party a perspective of entering the parliament any time soon, they show it has its own place in the party system. Rather than a normal party it is a conglomerate of extreme right organisations. The most important among these organisations is Slovenská pospolitosť (SP) but the relations between SP and other organisations are too unstable for useful characterisation. Another problem comes when we try to characterise the ideology. Most authors writing about the issue agree that ĽSNS does not officially present its true ideological positions, but rather just some changed, moderate views, in order to keep its formal status of political party (Struhár, 2012). The first party created around SP was already disbanded by the Supreme court in 2006.

ĽSNS was created slowly by crystallisation of extreme right subcultures. It was not until 2003 when SP started to present itself more publicly and built up an organisation. By 2006 it became the dominant group of extreme right. Subsequently it was struggling to create and maintain an official political party, which was thwarted by ministry of interior and the Supreme court. Finally before 2010 election the working model was created that functions until today.

ĽSNS positioned itself on the far right end of ideological spectrum, where it catches votes of anti-system voters, disappointed voters of radical right, uses racist appeals and collaborates with other extreme right groups such as Autonómni nacionalisti, Národný odpor, Nové slobodné Slovensko, Slovenské Hnutie Obrody, Kysucký vzdor or Jednota slovenskej mládeže.

8   Extreme Left in Slovakia

There are no relevant political subjects that would fall to the category of extreme left in Slovakia today. If we choose to ignore the relevancy criterion, we can find mainly some active anarchist groups with strong ties to Czech Republic and Western Europe such as Československá anarchistická federácia (Czechoslovak Anarchist Federation), Priama akcia (Direct Action) is a member of International Workers Association, or anti-fascism projects such as Blackblog. However the political impact of these groups is limited.

9   Political extremism from the security point of view

The third approach to the research of radical and extreme left and right is based on presumption, that some political groups have just no interest in entering the formalised electoral competition, but would rather try to fight against the system as a whole. Unless such political groups are quite big and loud, it is easy to imagine that they would be completely ignored by the political mainstream and be unknown outside of their subcultures. Therefore the first two approaches would be virtualy blind towards them. To gain relevant information about this kind of political subjects, it is useful to look at records of security forces. Of course these records are primarily concerned with

illegal, not political activities, but for example violent clashes with the police can have political dimension and can be considered a political activity.

The latest government Report (Správa o plnení úloh vyplývajúcich z Koncepcie boja proti extrémizmu s aktualizáciou úloh, 2012) states that out of all extremist groups, the most dangerous to the state are those manifesting racism and intolerance, represented by some organisations belonging to he far right. The report notes the slow formalisation of these groups from informal associations to attempts to establish political parties and enter the political arena. Manifestations of intolerance are mainly towards Roma ethic group. The report also notes the rising importance of the Internet and social networks in organising protests. The most active of these groups was Slovenská pospolitosť, that was operating on the entire area of the state with occasional cooperation with groups such as Kysucký vzdor or Národný odpor.

The Report did not mention any activities of political subjects belonging to extreme left, which is consistent with our findings using the first two approaches.

10 Conclusion

In this paper we showed the importance of distinguishing between the categories of radical and extreme right/left. On the example of Slovakia we saw that both these concepts have their own analytical value and using them as mutually interchangeable can have some very negative effect on political research and political discourse in general. Using the three different approaches to studying radical and extremist political subjects proved useful and mutually complementary. The outcome was a complex overview of political subjects with their ideological classification, but also their relative relevance in party system and the degree to which the state considers each one of them to be a thread.

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