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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Bachelor's Thesis

Populism in the Slovak Republic and its Threats

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Prague, July, 31



Samuel Blecharž

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Proposed Topic:” Populism in the Slovak Republic and its Threats”

Populism is a political approach that seeks to appeal to the concerns and interests of the general population, often by presenting itself as an anti-establishment movement. Populist leaders typically frame politics as a struggle between the common people and a corrupt or self-serving elite. Populism can take various forms and manifest across the political spectrum, but it generally involves a charismatic leader who claims to represent the "voice of the people" and promises to address their grievances. It's important to note that while populism can be a powerful force for mobilizing and energizing a political base, it can also pose challenges to democratic norms, as some populist leaders may undermine institutions and checks and balances in their pursuit of power. Populist movements can vary widely in their ideologies and policy agendas, making it a complex and multifaceted phenomenon in politics. Populist movements and leaders have had a presence in various countries, and Slovakia is no exception.

Populism in Slovakia, like elsewhere takes different forms, with leaders or parties using anti-establishment rhetoric, emphasizing national identity, and promising to address perceived grievances of the population. In many cases, the factors contributing to the rise of populism include economic dissatisfaction, concerns about immigration, a sense of disconnect between the political elite and the general population, and a desire for change. Populist movements often exploit these sentiments to gain political support. Populism can limit freedom in several ways, as populist leaders often adopt policies and tactics that may have negative implications for individual liberties. It's important to note that the impact of populism on freedom can vary depending on the specific context and the policies implemented. The rise of populism in Slovakia, as in many other countries, is a complex and

multifaceted phenomenon shaped by various historical, political, economic, and social factors. While it's challenging to pinpoint a single origin, several key developments and events have contributed to the emergence and growth of populist sentiments in the Slovak Republic. Here are some factors that may have played a role: post-communist tradition, economic discontent, corruption and scandals and political fragmentation.

Populism has been present in Slovakia since the early 1990s and the rule of the populist and authoritarian prime minister Vladimír Mečiar. Nonetheless, describing the entire timeline from the 1990s till nowadays would be too complex for this project; the proposed BA thesis will therefore focus on a more recent development, specifically with a narrower focus after the recent parliamentary elections that took place in September 2023.

One of the central themes is the premise that with rising populism, freedom of an individual is being diminished. Populism can have both direct and indirect effects on liberal democracy, and its impact can vary depending on the specific context and the nature of populist movements. The principal research question of the proposed thesis will be: **“Does the present populist government of the Slovak Republic threaten liberal democracy? If so, in what way?”**

Methodology:

The researcher will conduct two main roads on how to approach the topic

1. Political-philosophical theoretical research, which will define theoretical frameworks and provide answers about what populism is according to academic literature. Political-philosophical research about populism delves into the underlying ideas, principles, and philosophical foundations that shape populist movements and the implications of populism for political theory. Scholars engage with various philosophical perspectives to understand the origins, nature, and consequences of populism. Political-philosophical research on populism is dynamic and often draws from a range of theoretical perspectives, including liberal democracy, political liberalism, critical theory, post-colonial theory, and more. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical underpinnings and implications of populism in contemporary politics.

2. Empirical research is based on observation and measurement of phenomena. The goal is to gather data that can be analyzed and used to draw conclusions, make predictions, or test hypotheses. There are various empirical research methods, and the choice of method depends on the nature of the research question and the type of data needed. My case is researching the situation in the Slovak republic and proving whether the current government is against liberal democracy and therefore a threat.

Keywords populism, nativism, liberal democracy, Slovak Republic, government

Outline:

Introduction:

- Subject Matter and Methodology

Chapter 1: Theory of Populism

- Defining theory of populism and applying it in a case of Slovak Republic
- Explaining how populism limits liberal democracy and freedom of individual

Chapter 2: Normative research about data sets

- Proving through current government's legislative process and laws how is the current government populist

Chapter 3: How is populist worldview against liberal democracy

Conclusion

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Abstract

This bachelor's thesis , authored by Samuel Blecharž under the supervision of Jakub Franek, PhD., aims to explore the rise of populism in the Slovak Republic and its potential threats to liberal democracy. The thesis will focus specifically on the period following the parliamentary elections of September 2023. The core research question is whether the current populist government poses a threat to liberal democracy, and if so, how.

Populism, characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric and the appeal to the general population against a perceived corrupt elite, has been a significant force in Slovak politics since the early 1990s. The proposal outlines a two-pronged methodological approach: political-philosophical theoretical research to define populism and its implications, and empirical research to analyze the current Slovak government's legislative actions and their impact on liberal democracy.

The study will examine the historical, political, economic, and social factors contributing to populism in Slovakia, with a focus on the threats it poses to individual freedoms and democratic norms. The thesis will be structured into an introduction, three main chapters discussing the theory of populism, normative research on government actions, and the conflict between populist and liberal democratic principles, followed by a conclusion. Key sources include works by Canovan, Dahl, Mouffe, Mudde and Kaltwasser, Müller, Rosanvallon, and Urbinati.

Keywords: populism, nativism, liberal democracy, Slovak Republic, government, varieties of populism

1.Introduction

Populism is a political approach that seeks to appeal to the concerns and interests of the general population, often by presenting itself as an anti-establishment movement. Populist leaders typically frame politics as a struggle between the common people and a corrupt or self-serving elite. They often position themselves as outsiders challenging the status quo and promising radical change. Simplifying complex issues and framing them in stark, us-versus-them terms, they portray themselves as the voice of the marginalized and disenfranchised against a corrupt and detached elite. This narrative resonates with many disillusioned citizens who feel left behind by traditional political institutions and economic systems.

In this thesis I am writing about a specific time period since the last elections in the Slovak Republic, considering the fact that populism has been a long time phenomenon.

By tapping into this sentiment, populist leaders and movements garner support and mobilize voters who feel alienated from the political establishment. However, while anti-establishment rhetoric can be a powerful tool for populist movements to gain traction, it also raises concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and the potential for polarization within society. Populism can take various forms and manifest across the political spectrum, but it generally involves a charismatic leader who claims to represent the "voice of the people" and promises to address their grievances. It's important to note that while populism can be a powerful force for mobilizing and energizing a political base, it can also pose challenges to democratic norms, as some populist leaders may undermine institutions and checks and balances in their pursuit of power.

This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of populism in the Slovak Republic, utilizing a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates political science, sociology, and history. It examines both the internal dynamics of Slovak politics and the broader regional and global factors shaping the rise of populism. Additionally, this thesis evaluates the consequences of populism for democracy, governance, and societal cohesion, while also exploring potential strategies for addressing this phenomenon.

Populism in Slovakia, like elsewhere, takes different forms, with leaders or parties using anti-establishment rhetoric, emphasizing national identity, and promising to address perceived grievances of the population. In many cases, the factors contributing to the rise of populism include economic dissatisfaction, concerns about immigration, a sense of disconnect between the political elite and the general population, and a desire for change.

The rise of populism in Slovakia reflects broader trends across Europe and the world, where populist movements have gained traction by tapping into discontent with mainstream politics, globalization, and cultural change. However, it's essential to recognize that populism is a complex phenomenon with various manifestations, and its impact on Slovak politics continues to evolve.

Populism poses significant challenges to liberal democracy, often undermining its core principles and institutions. One of the most concerning aspects is the erosion of democratic institutions. Populist leaders tend to challenge the independence of institutions such as the judiciary, free press, and regulatory bodies, concentrating power in the executive branch and weakening the system of checks and balances essential for liberal democracies.

Equally, populism tends to prioritize the will of the majority over minority rights, leading to discrimination against marginalized groups and a disregard for the rule of law. This majoritarian approach can erode civil liberties and exacerbate social divisions, undermining the inclusivity and pluralism that are fundamental to liberal democracy.

Another way populism limits liberal democracy is through attacks on the media and free speech. Populist leaders often vilify the press as "fake news" or "the enemy of the people," seeking to control information flow and delegitimize criticism. This undermines the freedom of the press, a cornerstone of liberal democracy essential for holding power to account and ensuring transparency.

Furthermore, populism fosters polarization and divisiveness by framing politics as a battle between "the people" and supposed elites or marginalized groups. This exacerbates social tensions and weakens the sense of common purpose necessary for a healthy democracy. Populist agendas may prioritize nationalism over international cooperation, undermining global institutions and agreements crucial for addressing transnational challenges like climate change and terrorism. This phenomenon threatens electoral integrity by undermining the

credibility of elections through tactics such as voter suppression and spreading misinformation. This erodes trust in democratic institutions and can lead to contested or illegitimate election outcomes, further weakening the democratic process. This erodes the spirit of inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for differing viewpoints that underpin liberal democracy. Followingly, populism undermines the delicate balance between executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Populist movements may attempt to consolidate power in the executive branch, weakening the separation of powers and diminishing the ability of other branches to serve as effective checks on executive authority. This concentration of power can lead to authoritarian tendencies and diminish accountability, further destroying the foundations of liberal democracy. In addition, populism exacerbates socio-economic inequalities by framing political discourse in simplistic terms of "us versus them" or "the people versus the elites." This divisive rhetoric distracts from structural issues and impedes constructive dialogue on policies aimed at addressing inequality and promoting social justice. In doing so, populism perpetuates social divisions and impedes efforts to build a more equitable society, undermining the inclusive vision of democracy. Populism's disdain for international cooperation and global governance undermines efforts to address pressing global challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, and refugee crises. By prioritizing narrow national interests over collective action, populist leaders weaken multilateral institutions and impede efforts to find cooperative solutions to shared problems.

Populism in the Slovak Republic, as in many post-communist states, has been a prominent feature of its political landscape since the early 1990s. Stemming from socio-economic dislocations following the collapse of communism, coupled with disillusionment with the elite-driven transition process, populist movements found fertile ground among segments of the population. Understanding the evolution of populism in Slovakia requires a nuanced examination of its historical context, political dynamics, and socio-economic factors. The history of populism in the Slovak Republic is deeply intertwined with its post-communist transition, economic challenges, and political dynamics. From the Mečiar era to contemporary Eurosceptic movements, populist currents have shaped the country's political discourse, reflecting broader trends of discontent, nationalism, and distrust towards established institutions. Considering the complex interplay between socio-economic factors and populist appeals is crucial for assessing the trajectory of Slovak politics and its implications for democratic governance.

1.1 Research Objectives

The primary research objectives of this thesis are to examine the theoretical foundations of populism, analyze its manifestations in Slovakia, and assess the impact of populist governance on liberal democracy. First, the study aims to define populism and its core principles, distinguishing it from other political ideologies. This involves a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of populism, drawing on key academic sources. Second, the research seeks to document both historical and contemporary manifestations of populism in Slovak politics, providing a detailed account of how populist movements have evolved and influenced the political landscape. Third, the objective is to assess the impact of populist governance on the principles and institutions of liberal democracy in Slovakia. This includes evaluating legislative actions, media influence, and corruption cases to understand how populism affects democratic norms, individual freedoms, and the rule of law. By achieving these objectives, the thesis aims to contribute to the broader discourse on populism and its implications for democratic governance.

1.2 Contribution

The contribution of this thesis is to deepen one's understanding of a populism problem in my home country of the Slovak Republic. How it limits the freedom of an individual and totally destroys democratic institutions, keeping the country very difficult to live in.

By providing a comprehensive theoretical analysis of populism, the study clarifies the ideological foundations and distinguishing features of populist movements, contributing to a more nuanced academic discourse. It offers a detailed examination of the specific manifestations of populism in Slovakia, tracing its historical roots and contemporary developments. This case study enriches the broader understanding of how populism can adapt and thrive in different political and cultural settings.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis of legislative actions, media influence, and corruption cases under the current Slovak government provides concrete evidence of how populist governance can undermine democratic institutions and principles. This contributes to the literature by linking theoretical insights with practical outcomes, highlighting the real-world implications of populist rule.

2. Literature Review

Introduction to Populism

Populism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon characterized by its anti-establishment rhetoric and appeal to the general population against a perceived corrupt elite. It manifests across the political spectrum and varies widely in its ideologies and policy agendas. The study of populism has gained significant attention in recent years due to its rising influence in global politics. This literature review focuses on the theoretical foundations of populism, its manifestations in the Slovak Republic, and its potential threats to liberal democracy.

Theoretical Framework of Populism

Simon Bornschier's work in the Swiss Political Science Review provides a comprehensive examination of populism, defining it as a "thin ideology" that positions 'the people' against 'the elite'. Bornschier emphasizes the historical persistence and geographical diversity of populism, noting its ability to adapt to various political and cultural contexts. This adaptability is crucial for understanding how populist movements evolve and resonate with people under different circumstances

Populism's dual capacity to democratize and destabilize is a key theme in Bornschier's analysis. While populism can revitalize political engagement and expand democratic participation, it often undermines nuanced policy discussions and fosters divisions within society. This "crisis of representation" can lead to cycles of public disillusionment and political instability

Populism in Slovakia

Populism in Slovakia has been a significant force since the early 1990s, particularly during the rule of Vladimír Mečiar. The current study focuses on the period following the parliamentary elections of September 2023, examining whether the present populist government threatens liberal democracy and individual freedoms

Media Influence and Populism

The influence of alternative and disinformation media is a critical factor in the success of populist movements in Slovakia. These media platforms, often pro-Russian and supportive of the aggressor in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, provide a platform for disinformation and influence. This media landscape contrasts sharply with regular media in functioning liberal democracies, which engage in critical journalism and opposition

Karine Nahon's text "Where there is Social Media there is Politics" highlights the intrinsic link between social media and politics, emphasizing that social media platforms are not neutral and are deeply embedded with political biases. This environment facilitates the spread of disinformation and manipulation of public opinion, contributing to the success of populist movements.

Empirical and Normative Research

The research methodology includes both political-philosophical theoretical research and empirical research. The theoretical research aims to define populism and its implications, drawing from a range of academic literature. Empirical research involves analyzing the current Slovak government's legislative actions to assess their impact on liberal democracy.

The study will be structured into three main chapters: the theory of populism, normative research on government actions, and the conflict between populist and liberal democratic principles. Key sources include works by Canovan, Dahl, Mouffe, Mudde and Kaltwasser, Müller, Rosanvallon, and Urbinati.

3. Methodology

This thesis employs a two-pronged methodological approach to explore the rise of populism in the Slovak Republic and its potential threats to liberal democracy: political-philosophical theoretical research and empirical research.

Political-Philosophical Theoretical Research

The political-philosophical theoretical research will focus on defining the theoretical frameworks of populism and its implications according to academic literature. This involves

delving into the underlying ideas, principles, and philosophical foundations that shape populist movements, as well as the implications of populism for political theory. The research will engage with various philosophical perspectives to understand the origins, nature, and consequences of populism. Key theoretical perspectives to be explored include:

Liberal Democracy: Understanding how populism interacts with the principles of liberal democracy. Political Liberalism: Analyzing the tension between populism and political liberalism. Critical Theory: Investigating the critiques of populism from a critical theory standpoint. Post-Colonial Theory: Examining how post-colonial theory addresses populist movements.

This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical underpinnings and implications of populism in contemporary politics.

Empirical Research

The empirical research is based on observation and measurement of phenomena within the Slovak Republic, focusing on whether the current populist government poses a threat to liberal democracy. The goal is to gather data that can be analyzed to draw conclusions, make predictions, or test hypotheses. The research will utilize the following methods:

- Analysis of Party Manifestos: Reviewing the party manifestos to understand the legislative intentions and proposed laws by the current government.
- Case Studies of Corruption: Documenting and analyzing known corruption cases within the last ten years to identify patterns and impacts of populist governance.

Notable cases include:

- The overpricing scandal of medical CT equipment in Piešťany.
- The 60 million Euro donation to Andrej Babiš from Robert Fico's government.
- The Váhov-SK corruption case involving financial misconduct and political connections.
- The connection between the SMER-SSD party and the Italian mafia, highlighted by the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak.

Data Sources and Analysis

The empirical research will involve both qualitative and quantitative data collection. Qualitative data will be sourced from political documents, party manifestos, legislative records, and news reports. Quantitative data will include statistical analysis of legislative actions and public opinion surveys

4. Results and Discussions

The empirical findings on populism in Slovakia reveal a significant alignment between the current government's legislative actions and populist themes. The analysis of party manifestos and legislative records indicates a consistent pattern of prioritizing policies that emphasize anti-elitism, nationalism, and anti-immigration sentiments. Specific legislative actions observed include the centralization of power, the weakening of independent institutions, and efforts to limit the influence of the media and civil society organizations. These actions suggest a deliberate strategy to undermine checks and balances, thereby consolidating political power in a manner consistent with populist governance.

In addition to legislative analysis, the review of corruption cases over the past decade highlights a pervasive pattern of political and financial misconduct that further characterizes the populist approach in Slovakia. Notable examples include the overpricing of medical CT equipment in Piešťany, revealing systemic issues within public procurement processes. Another significant case involves the 60 million Euro donation to Andrej Babiš from Robert Fico's government, showcasing the intertwining of political favors and financial benefits. The Váhostav-SK scandal and the documented connections between the SMER-SD party and the Italian mafia, particularly highlighted by the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, underscore the extent of corruption and its impact on public trust and governance.

The results suggest that the current populist government in Slovakia poses substantial challenges to liberal democracy. The legislative measures and corruption cases indicate a shift towards authoritarianism and a departure from democratic norms and principles. The weakening of independent institutions, control over the media, and the perpetuation of corrupt practices collectively undermine the democratic framework and erode public confidence in political processes.

In discussing these findings, it is evident that populism in Slovakia not only reflects a broader global trend but also presents unique challenges specific to the country's political and social context. The centralization of power and the erosion of democratic institutions are indicative of a deliberate strategy to entrench populist rule. This raises concerns about the long-term implications for democratic governance, individual freedoms, and the rule of law. The interplay between populist rhetoric and practical governance in Slovakia highlights the need for robust democratic safeguards and vigilant civil society efforts to counteract the negative impacts of populism. The results underscore the importance of ongoing research and policy analysis to understand and address the evolving dynamics of populism in contemporary politics.

5. Populism in a Theoretical Approach

"Populist Mobilization Across Time and Space" refers to the dynamic ways in which populist movements and ideologies manifest and impact politics across different regions and throughout history. Simon Bornschier's examination in the *Swiss Political Science Review* provides a comprehensive look at this phenomenon by defining populism, analyzing its historical context, and comparing its manifestations globally. Populism is characterized as a "thin ideology" that typically positions 'the people' against 'the elite', often blaming these elites for various societal and political issues while idealizing the virtues of the common people. This ideology asserts that the elite are out of touch with or actively working against the interests of the ordinary people. (Bornschier, 2017, p.301)

Historically, populist movements are not confined to the contemporary era but have been recurrent features in political landscapes across different periods and regions. Bornschier's analysis includes a comparative perspective that reveals both the commonalities and the unique adaptations of populism in various cultural and political contexts. This comparative approach helps to understand how populist rhetoric and strategies evolve to resonate with people under different circumstances.

“The study further explores the role of populist parties in shaping political discourse and action. These parties vary in how they conceptualize 'the people' and 'the elite', influenced by

their specific cultural, political, or economic settings. This variability allows populist parties to effectively mobilize diverse voter bases by tapping into local sentiments and issues. Moreover, Bornschier discusses the implications of populist movements for democratic systems. While populism can serve as a corrective force that addresses representation gaps in political systems, it often introduces challenges. These include promoting anti-pluralist views and potentially destabilizing democratic institutions by simplifying complex political issues and fostering divisions within society.” (Bornschier, 2017, p 305-308)

Through this detailed exploration, Bornschier illuminates the multifaceted nature of populist mobilization, showing how it can both challenge and change the democratic processes and political landscapes it intersects with across time and space.

Populism's adaptability allows it to manifest across various political and cultural landscapes, which Bornschier critically examines through the lens of historical persistence and geographical diversity. He argues that the enduring appeal of populism can be attributed to its flexible nature, enabling it to latch onto different "host" ideologies, such as socialism, nationalism, or even libertarianism, depending on the local context. This chameleonic quality means that while the core anti-elite and pro-people sentiments remain constant, the specific targets and solutions proposed by populist movements can vary dramatically from one context to another.

Bornscheir also highlights a key feature of populist movements: their dual capacity to democratize and to destabilize. On one hand, populist movements can revitalize political engagement by mobilizing segments of the population that feel alienated from the political process, thereby expanding democratic participation. They often do this by challenging entrenched political elites and advocating for more direct forms of democratic involvement, which can lead to significant political reforms and greater accountability.

On the other hand, the simplification tactics used by populists can undermine nuanced policy discussions and promote polarized, emotional reactions rather than informed deliberation. This aspect of populism often leads to what Bornschier calls a "crisis of representation," where the quick fixes and sweeping reforms proposed by populists fail to address deeper systemic issues, potentially leading to cycles of public disillusionment and political instability.

Moreover, Bornschier's analytical framework considers the implications of populist rhetoric on the quality of democracy. He discusses how populism's emphasis on the general will can conflict with liberal democratic principles, such as the protection of minority rights and the rule of law. Populists often challenge these principles, advocating instead for a majoritarian form of democracy that prioritizes the will of the majority, sometimes at the expense of checks and balances designed to prevent the tyranny of the majority.

Through this deep analysis, Bornschier presents populism as a multifaceted phenomenon that reflects broader societal discontent with the political status quo. He encourages scholars and policymakers to critically engage with the nuances of populist movements, recognizing both their potential to contribute positively to political renewal and their risks of exacerbating democratic fragilities. By doing so, Bornschier not only enriches our understanding of populism's historical and spatial variations but also highlights the complex interplay between populist strategies and democratic principles.

The study "Varieties of Populism across a Left-Right Spectrum: The Case of the Front National, the Northern League, Podemos, and Five Star Movement" provides a comprehensive academic analysis of populist parties within a Western European context. It investigates the conceptualization of populism as a 'thin ideology,' suggesting that while populist parties share several core ideational features, they significantly diverge based on the thicker ideological traditions from which they draw. This comparative analysis reveals both convergences and divergences among the selected populist parties—Front National, Northern League, Podemos, and Five Star Movement—particularly in their conceptions of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and the nature of popular sovereignty and democracy.

The paper argues that all four parties share a common denigration of the elite, portrayed as a separate, corrupt 'caste' implicated in economic and European integration conflicts. However, differences emerge in their definitions of 'the people.' The Northern League and Front National tend to adopt an ethno-cultural perspective, while Podemos and Five Star Movement emphasize a more inclusive, economically-focused definition. This variability is a result of the interaction between the 'thin' ideology of populism and the 'thick' ideologies of other political traditions the parties are embedded in, leading to distinct expressions of populist thought.

Additionally, the study discusses the notion of political representation within these parties. While the Northern League and Front National promote a form of illiberal democracy that emphasizes direct means like referendums, Podemos and Five Star Movement initially advocated for more pluralistic, grassroots forms of democracy, though they have increasingly embraced more traditional political structures as they transition from social movements to established political parties .

This detailed analysis reveals the nuanced ways in which populism can manifest across different political and ideological landscapes, emphasizing the adaptability and contextual dependency of populist ideologies. **Common Populist Traits:** All parties share a critique of the political elite, which they depict as a separate, corrupt 'caste'. They appeal to the notion of representing the true interests of 'the people' against this elite. **Variation in Populism:** The parties vary in their definition of 'the people' and the nature of the popular sovereignty they advocate. This variability reflects the influence of the broader non-populist ideological traditions from which each party draws. **Three Main Conflicts:** The article discusses three main conflicts that are central to their populist ideologies: cultural (nativism), economic (state versus market), and European Union integration. Each party's stance on these issues is influenced by their broader ideological frameworks.

Margaret Canovan's scholarly inquiry into populism, presented in "Populism for Political Theorists?", serves as a critical reflection on the understudied relationship between populism and political theory. Canovan articulates a compelling argument for why political theorists should engage more deeply with the concept of populism, despite its often negative connotations within intellectual discourse.

Canovan highlights the inherent difficulties in delineating the contours of populism, which encompasses a diverse array of movements often characterized by a confrontational style and an anti-elite sentiment. These movements, while diverse, share a common rhetorical approach that emphasizes direct appeals to "the people" and advocates for more referendums and direct democratic processes. The challenge lies in identifying a coherent set of attributes that define populism across different contexts, which remains a contentious issue within political theory. (Canovan, 2006,p.242)

The paper delves into the complex interplay between populism and democracy, specifically through the lens of the "two-strand theory." This theory posits that modern liberal democracy is a synthesis of liberal principles (emphasizing rights and legal frameworks) and democratic ideals (focusing on the sovereignty of the majority). Populist movements challenge this synthesis by prioritizing democratic purity, often at the potential expense of liberal safeguards. Canovan urges theorists to consider how populist dynamics can simultaneously pose challenges to and reveal the limitations of established democratic frameworks.

Canovan proposes that populism can potentially address a void in contemporary ideological discourse by challenging the prevailing narrative of progress and vanguardism. This critique is rooted in the observation that many ideologies implicitly valorize a "vanguard" while relegating the masses to passive recipients of future benefits. A populist ideology, by contrast, could emphasize a more immediate and equitable recognition of the common people's values and skepticism towards the promises of progressive elites. (Canovan, 2006, p.244-247) The article also emphasizes the need for a more rigorous examination of the term "the people," a central yet under-analyzed concept in both populist rhetoric and democratic theory more broadly. Canovan points out the multiple meanings and uses of the term, which can refer to the sovereign entity, a national group, or the common masses. This ambiguity serves as a fertile ground for political manipulation but also raises profound theoretical questions about the nature of political authority and legitimacy in democratic societies.

The ideology of populism, as discussed in Ben Stanley's paper "The Thin Ideology of Populism", is characterized by a distinct but limited set of ideas that differentiate it from other political doctrines. Populism is described as a "thin" ideology because it does not have the comprehensive scope of "full" ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism, or socialism. Instead, populism is centered around a specific set of core concepts which shape its interpretation of politics.

“Stanley argues that populism, despite its limitations, constitutes a distinct ideology because it conveys a specific interpretation of the political. However, its "thin" nature prevents it from standing alone as a full-fledged political ideology, lacking the capacity to address a wide range of political issues. Instead, populism often coexists or overlaps with "full" ideologies, influencing their core ideas.” (Stanley, 2008, p.100-103)

Populism's thin nature means that it is typically found in combination with other ideologies. For example, in the context of party politics, populism often inflects with ideologies like nationalism, socialism, or conservatism, adapting to fit the specific context.

Populism is a political approach that emphasizes a division between "the people" and "the elite," and is characterized by the rallying of the common people against perceived privileged groups. While lacking a uniform ideological foundation, populism generally uses rhetoric that advocates for the interests of ordinary people and criticizes the establishment. This rhetoric can be adopted by leaders on both ends of the political spectrum, making populism manifest in both right-wing and left-wing forms. Populism often emerges in response to economic inequality, cultural shifts, or feelings of alienation among the population. Economic downturns and perceived failures of globalization can particularly drive populist movements as individuals seek alternatives that promise to address their grievances and restore a sense of control and national pride.

5.1 Populism in a Context of a Liberal Democracy

Huber and Schimpf's (2017) study, *"On the Distinct Effects of Left-Wing and Right-Wing Populism on Democratic Quality,"* delves into how left-wing and right-wing populism distinctly impact democracy, focusing specifically on minority rights and mutual constraints. The authors argue that, despite both types of populism sharing an anti-elitist stance and a claim to represent the general will of the people, their effects on democratic quality diverge significantly due to their different ideological foundations.

Left-wing populism, characterized by its inclusive and egalitarian approach, tends to advocate for the rights of minorities. These parties often see minorities as part of their broader constituency and push for equal representation and rights, aligning with their overall ideology of social equality and inclusivity. On the other hand, right-wing populism is generally exclusive, often targeting minorities as part of their political strategy. These parties emphasize nativism and cultural homogeneity, leading to policies that restrict minority rights and promote the interests of a defined in-group. Regarding mutual constraints, the authors argue that both left-wing and right-wing populist parties negatively impact this aspect of democratic quality, although the effect is driven more by the populist element than by the

host ideology. Populist parties, once in power, tend to undermine checks and balances, viewing them as obstacles to implementing the will of the people as they interpret it. This leads to efforts to concentrate power in the executive branch and weaken judicial and legislative oversight. (Huber and Schimpf)

Empirical analysis using data from 30 European countries between 1990 and 2012 supports these arguments. The study finds that left-wing populist parties are positively associated with minority rights, while right-wing populist parties have a negative association. In terms of mutual constraints, both types of populism show a negative relationship, reflecting a common tendency to erode institutional checks and balances.

Huber and Schimpf conclude that populism's impact on democracy cannot be fully understood without considering the underlying ideology of populist parties. While the populist element is crucial in shaping attitudes towards mutual constraints, the host ideology significantly influences how these parties treat minority rights. Thus, future research on populism and democracy should account for these ideological differences to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship.

The study "Populist Democrats? Unpacking the Relationship Between Populist and Democratic Attitudes at the Citizen Level" by Andrej Zaslove and Maurits Meijers explores the intricate relationship between populist attitudes and democratic support among citizens. Utilizing unique data from the Netherlands, the study consists of three separate investigations. Study 1 examines the connection between populist attitudes, satisfaction with democracy, and support for democracy. It finds that individuals with stronger populist attitudes are generally supportive of democracy but are dissatisfied with its functioning. Study 2 delves into the relationship between populism and support for liberal democracy, revealing that while populist citizens reject the mediation by political parties, they do support key tenets of liberal democracy such as free speech and the rule of law. Study 3 focuses on the support for majoritarian democracy among populists, showing a strong preference for majority rule without judicial constraints and the use of referendums. Overall, the findings suggest that the relationship between populism and democracy is more nuanced than often assumed, with populist citizens displaying both support for democratic principles and a critical stance towards certain democratic institutions. (Zaslove and Meijers p.1-27)

The combined findings from these three studies suggest that the relationship between populism and democracy at the citizen level is complex. Populist citizens are not inherently anti-democratic; rather, their support for democracy coexists with a critical stance towards its current practices and institutions. They advocate for a form of democracy that is more direct and less mediated by traditional political structures. This nuanced perspective challenges the often simplistic view that populism is entirely incompatible with democratic principles.

Furthermore, the study's context in the Netherlands, a country with both left- and right-wing populist parties, provides valuable insights into how populist attitudes manifest across the political spectrum. The results highlight the importance of understanding the specific democratic preferences of populist citizens, which can vary significantly from one aspect of democracy to another.

Overall, the research by Zaslove and Meijers contributes to a deeper understanding of how populist attitudes influence democratic support and satisfaction, suggesting that populism's impact on democracy is not uniformly negative but multifaceted and contingent on specific democratic elements.

Davide Vittori's article, "Threat or Corrective? Assessing the Impact of Populist Parties in Government on the Qualities of Democracy: A 19-Country Comparison," investigates the impact of populist parties in government on the qualities of democracy in 19 European countries. The study addresses three main research questions: whether populists in government are more likely to negatively affect the quality of democracies than non-populists, whether the role of populists in government matters, and which type of populism (exclusionary or inclusionary) is more likely to negatively impact liberal-democratic regimes. The article distinguishes between exclusionary populists, typically associated with radical right parties, and inclusionary populists, often linked to radical left or social democratic parties. Exclusionary populists focus on excluding outgroups like immigrants, while inclusionary populists aim to include marginalized groups and expand welfare. Using data from the Global State of Democracy Index (GSoDI), the study measures various democratic qualities, including political representation, pluralism, participation, and minority rights protection. It employs a combination of time-series analysis to detect structural breaks and panel regression models to test the hypotheses. Key findings indicate

that populist parties in government generally have a negative impact on the qualities of democracy compared to non-populist governments, with structural breaks in democratic qualities occurring more frequently when populists are in government. The role of populist parties (e.g., major partner, junior partner, external supporter) influences the extent of their impact. Populist parties as external supporters have a similar impact on democratic qualities as when they are not in government, while major partners tend to have a more significant negative impact than junior partners. Additionally, exclusionary populist parties (EPPs) generally have a more detrimental effect on democratic qualities than inclusionary populist parties (IPPs), particularly in areas like checks on government, freedom of expression, fundamental rights, and civil liberties. (Vittori p.589-609)

The findings support the hypothesis that populism in government is more likely to harm the qualities of democracy. While populists in opposition may have some positive effects on political participation, their presence in government, especially as major partners, tends to undermine democratic institutions and rights. Exclusionary populists have a more pronounced negative impact compared to inclusionary populists. The study underscores the potential threats posed by populist parties in government to the health of democratic systems, with specific attention to the roles they play and their ideological orientations.

5.2 Radical Right- Euroscepticism

The authors posit that anti-establishment rhetoric, a hallmark of populist discourse, is increasingly influential in European political landscapes. This rhetoric is particularly salient among populist and challenger parties, which often view the European Union as the epitome of elite-driven politics. Through the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), the study examines how the emphasis on anti-elite rhetoric correlates with opposition to European integration across both Western and Eastern Europe. The findings reveal a robust relationship between anti-establishment sentiments and Eurosceptic positions, transcending traditional left-right ideological divides and various party characteristics. This research underscores the nuanced ways in which populism and anti-elite sentiments shape party politics and attitudes towards European integration in contemporary Europe. (Polk and Rovny)

The study identifies that different crises had distinct impacts on Euroscepticism. The Great Recession triggered financial difficulties and austerity measures, particularly in debtor countries, and exposed the limitations of pan-European solidarity. The migrant crisis escalated immigration issues, which populist parties framed in terms of ethnopluralism and security, thereby fueling Eurosceptic sentiments. Brexit demonstrated the potential reversibility of European integration, influencing Eurosceptic narratives across Europe. The research highlights the distinction between left-wing and right-wing populist Euroscepticism, with the former focusing on socioeconomic issues and the latter on cultural and national identity concerns. Despite the varied responses and strategies of populist parties, mainstream political parties have shown resilience against the rising tide of populist Euroscepticism, suggesting a complex interplay between populist and mainstream political actors shaped by national contexts and specific crises. The study concludes with suggestions for further research into the performative aspects of crises and the discursive construction of populist narratives, as well as the long-term institutional legacies of these critical junctures. (Pirro et al.)

5.3 Right Wing Populism- Nativism

Nativism is defined by Betz as an intense hostility towards anything considered foreign and threatening to national cohesion. In contemporary radical right-wing populism, nativism is a core feature that complements populist rhetoric by promoting exclusionary policies and fostering a collective national identity. The Know Nothing Movement in the antebellum United States focused on anti-immigrant sentiments, particularly against Catholics and Irish immigrants. This movement utilized nativist rhetoric to galvanize support by portraying immigrants as a threat to American values and jobs. Post-Civil War agrarian populism targeted economic elites and perceived foreign influences that threatened the livelihoods of American farmers. This movement combined populist and nativist rhetoric to unite farmers against a common enemy, thereby strengthening their political influence. (Betz p.335-353)

In France, Boulangism had a more peripheral nativist component. The movement primarily focused on opposing the political elite and advocating for national rejuvenation. However, its

aftermath saw the emergence of a more explicit populist/nativist synthesis that influenced later political developments.

Betz highlights that nativism allows populist movements to bridge differences between social groups by uniting them against a common "alien" threat. This strategy enhances the movements' appeal by positioning them as defenders of national identity.

The paper also draws parallels between historical nativist populism and modern instances, such as the rise of radical right-wing parties in Europe and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. In both contexts, nativism plays a crucial role in mobilizing support by emphasizing exclusionary and nationalist rhetoric.

6. Populism in the Slovak Republic

Populism in Slovakia, like in many post-communist countries, has roots deeply embedded in the historical, social, and political transformations the country has undergone since the fall of communism. The end of communist rule in 1989 marked the beginning of a tumultuous period as Slovakia transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. This period of transition was characterized by significant economic challenges, including high unemployment, inflation, and the closure of uncompetitive industries. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, which led to the emergence of an independent Slovak state, further intensified these issues.

During the early years of independence, Slovakia experienced political instability and economic hardship. The initial phase of privatization and economic reform created a sense of insecurity among the populace, as the benefits of the new economic system were unevenly distributed. This environment of uncertainty and discontent provided fertile ground for populist rhetoric. Leaders who promised to protect the interests of the "ordinary people" against the perceived threats of globalization, economic liberalization, and political elites found a receptive audience.

Vladimír Mečiar, a key figure in Slovak politics during the 1990s, exemplified this populist turn. As the Prime Minister during much of the 1990s, Mečiar capitalized on nationalist sentiments and dissatisfaction with the economic transition. His style of governance was

characterized by authoritarian tendencies, cronyism, and a confrontational approach towards both domestic opposition and international partners. Mečiar's rhetoric often portrayed his political adversaries as traitors and his policies as necessary for protecting Slovak sovereignty and identity.

The fall of Mečiar at the end of the 1990s did not mark the end of populism in Slovakia. Instead, it evolved and adapted to new contexts. The early 2000s saw the rise of new political movements and parties that tapped into ongoing social and economic discontent. Robert Fico and his party, Smer-SD (Direction – Social Democracy), emerged as a dominant force, blending leftist economic policies with nationalist and populist rhetoric. Fico's tenure as Prime Minister, starting in 2006, was marked by policies aimed at addressing social inequalities and protecting the welfare state, while also emphasizing a strong national identity and skepticism towards foreign influences.

As I state in a previous paragraph devoted to the history of populism in the Slovak republic, due to a rather shorter length, which is expected from a Bachelor's thesis, I am focusing mostly on the period from last elections, but historical context is needed.

After the fall of communism in 1989, Slovakia, which was part of Czechoslovakia until 1992, experienced significant economic challenges. These challenges were more severe compared to its Czech counterpart, particularly in terms of higher unemployment rates. The process of privatizing state property was marred by corruption, exacerbating the economic difficulties and increasing public skepticism towards radical economic liberalization. Moreover, Slovaks have generally held a negative view of their domestic politics and political actors. This sentiment has been consistently reflected in public opinion surveys over the past two decades. Another crucial factor contributing to the rise of populism is the polarization of the party system, which has divided political parties into two main blocs. This polarization was most pronounced during the government of Vladimír Mečiar in the late 1990s, a period marked by significant distrust towards the political elite. These factors—economic hardships, negative perceptions of politics, and party system polarization—created favorable conditions for the emergence of populist movements and parties in Slovakia. The document notes that populism became a key strategy for several political parties, albeit with varying degrees of success. These parties exploited populist rhetoric to gain public support, often framing their messages around the dichotomy of 'the people' versus 'the elites'. The evolution of the Slovak party

system since 1989 has been marked by significant developments. The collapse of the communist regime led to the disintegration of existing political structures and the creation of new parties. Initially, broad dissident movements like Public Against Violence (VPN) emerged, which later fragmented. The Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), led by Vladimír Mečiar, became a significant force in Slovak politics. Other parties, including the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Slovak National Party (SNS), also played crucial roles. The party system underwent further changes with the rise of new parties such as Smer, founded by Robert Fico, which consolidated support from smaller leftist parties. On the right, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) aimed to unify center-right forces but faced limited success. The result was a stable yet dynamic party system characterized by a dominant left-leaning party, Smer, and a fragmented right-wing opposition. (Spáč 227-258)

In the post-communist era, political actors in Slovakia have employed populist strategies with strong ethnic and nationalist leanings. Since the fall of the communist regime in 1989 and the establishment of a pluralistic democracy, these strategies have proven effective in mobilizing substantial voter support. The recent revival of national populism is particularly noteworthy as it occurs in the context of Slovakia's successful social transformation, which led to the development of a liberal-democratic regime and full membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). National populism in Slovakia involves appealing to voters through traditional populist methods that emphasize ethnic and nationalist elements. This broader definition encompasses various political actors, not just extremist or radical right-wing parties. The most significant catalyst for the recent resurgence of national populism was the 2006 parliamentary elections, which resulted in a new government formed by three parties with national populist characteristics: Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), the Slovak National Party (SNS), and the People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS). These parties' electoral success and subsequent coalition government have significantly influenced the political landscape, shaping the dialogue on ethnic identity, language, and interethnic relations. The study highlights that the tradition of populist appeals in Slovakia is deeply rooted, with historical precedents that emphasize ethnic and nationalist elements. Leading Slovak politicians throughout the 20th century often framed the 'Slovak issue' in terms of ethnic and national self-identification. This tradition has continued post-1989, influencing contemporary political strategies and voter

mobilization. The socio-political environment, shaped by frequent changes in political regimes and social orders, has also contributed to the development and persistence of national populism. These historical and social factors have created a fertile ground for national populists to spread their messages and gain political traction. (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová)

Corruption in Slovakia ranges from simple bribes to complex schemes, and proving it is challenging. Despite EU efforts to combat corruption, a Eurobarometer survey (2014) indicates Slovaks feel bribery has increased. Slovakia is criticized for limited judiciary independence, issues with corruption prosecution, political funding, public procurement, and misuse of EU funds. Slovakia ranks as the fifth most corrupt of 28 EU countries, with 90% of citizens perceiving corruption as widespread and more than half believing it has increased recently.

Penalties for accepting bribes range from two to twelve years, while offering bribes can result in up to ten years of imprisonment. A 2014 EY survey highlights pervasive corruption in the business sector. Fifty-six percent of Slovaks consider corruption widespread, and 62% of managers would use corrupt practices to win business. Slovakia also has a high tolerance for excessive representation expenses and personal gifts to win orders. Only 18% of Slovak companies have whistleblowing hotlines, compared to 96% in the USA. Additionally, 60% of respondents believe non-ethical practices are justifiable to meet financial targets.

To combat corruption, corporations should implement and regularly test anti-fraud mechanisms, train employees on fraud risks, and establish anonymous whistleblowing systems. The Whistleblowing Act, effective January 1, 2015, mandates employers with over 50 employees to implement whistleblowing hotlines, evaluate reports, and protect whistleblowers from sanctions. Non-compliance can result in fines up to EUR 20,000. Properly implemented whistleblowing systems can provide valuable information on potential risks and help mitigate fraudulent practices. (Tomeš)

In my opinion corruption of elites has been and still is the biggest problem that Slovak republic has faced and is facing up until today. The corruption is present in all levels of Slovak society, starting from politicians to lower levels.

As I state in the introduction of my thesis, the function of this thesis is to prove which political parties in the Slovak Republic are populist.

I take a closer look at different party manifestos and what type of laws they have been trying to propose to a parliament, which provides me information based on a theory that I am writing in this thesis earlier.

Firstly I state all the corruption cases that have happened and are known to the public within the set specific time frame during the past 10 years.

A hospital in Piešťany, which is a rather small town in western part of Slovakia got medical CT equipment for 1.6 million Euros, while a Czech hospital paid 540 000 for exactly the same one. A company called Medical Group SK, where co-owner and former Speaker of Parliament, Pavol Paška were receiving lucrative state contracts. This happened in 2014, where SMER-SSD was a leading political party in a coalition. Also in 2014, Andrej Babiš received a huge donation from Robert Fico's government worth 60 million Euros for his Duslo Šála. Robert Fico was lying about that donation publicly. The Váhostav corruption case is one of the significant scandals that emerged in Slovakia, involving the construction company Vahostav-SK. This case highlighted issues of financial misconduct, insolvency fraud, and the broader implications for Slovakian politics and business practices. Vahostav-SK, a major construction company in Slovakia, was involved in numerous public infrastructure projects, including highways and other large-scale constructions. The company filed for restructuring in 2015, which led to significant financial losses for its creditors, many of whom were small and medium-sized enterprises. Vahostav-SK was accused of deliberately mismanaging its finances to declare insolvency and then restructure its debts in a way that prioritized the company's own interests over those of its creditors. This involved accusations of transferring assets to related companies to shield them from creditors. The case drew significant attention due to Vahostav's connections with political figures and allegations of corruption. There were claims that the company received favorable treatment due to its ties with influential politicians. The restructuring process led to severe financial repercussions for many small businesses that were owed money by Vahostav-SK. Creditors received only a fraction of what they were owed, leading to widespread discontent and protests. The case prompted legal investigations and brought to light issues within Slovakia's legal and regulatory framework regarding insolvency and corporate restructuring. It also sparked political debates and calls for reforms to prevent similar occurrences in the future. In 2016

Robert Kaliňák and Ján Počiatek were prominent figures in Slovak politics, both serving as ministers in the government. Kaliňák was the Minister of Interior, while Počiatek held positions such as Minister of Finance and later Minister of Transport. The corruption allegations against Kaliňák and Počiatek emerged primarily from their alleged connections to shady business dealings and misuse of public funds. The case gained significant media attention and public outrage due to the high-profile nature of the individuals involved. The connection of the Italian mafia to Slovakia's SMER-SD party and the killing of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak is a significant and tragic chapter in recent Slovak history. This case brought to light deep-rooted issues of corruption and organized crime in Slovakia, leading to widespread public outrage and political upheaval. Ján Kuciak was an investigative journalist working for the Slovak news website Aktuality.sk. He was known for his reports on corruption and tax fraud involving influential businessmen and politicians. Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, were found murdered in their home in February 2018. Kuciak's reports suggested that Vadala had connections to individuals in the SMER-SD party, Slovakia's ruling party at the time. This included allegations that members of the SMER-SD government had close business and personal relationships with Vadala and his associates. These connections raised suspicions that organized crime figures were influencing Slovak politics and benefiting from protection and favorable treatment by the authorities. The murder of Ján Kuciak and the revelations about the connections between the Italian mafia and Slovak politicians have had a lasting impact on Slovakia. It underscored the urgent need for transparency, accountability, and the protection of journalists. The case remains a poignant reminder of the threats posed by corruption and organized crime to democracy and the rule of law. (Bárdy)

This is just a brief look into what is the history of corruption in the most successful political party in Slovak history- SMER-SSD. Obviously, there are many more corruption cases.

Peter Pellegrini, the leader of Hlas-SD and former Prime Minister of Slovakia (2018-2020), has been accused of involvement in various corruption cases during his tenure with SMER-SD, particularly concerning public procurement and state fund allocation. Denisa Saková, a prominent member of Hlas-SD and former Minister of the Interior under SMER-SD, has faced scrutiny over her role in managing Interior Ministry contracts, with allegations suggesting that certain contracts were awarded to companies with ties to political figures. Specific cases include the National Security Authority (NSA) contracts, where

contracts were allegedly awarded to politically connected companies, raising concerns about transparency and corruption. Additionally, there have been reports of irregularities and favoritism in the allocation of public contracts during the tenure of Hlas-SD members when they were part of SMER-SD, implicating the party in ongoing corruption practices. While Hlas-SD is a relatively new party, the corruption allegations primarily stem from the period when its key members were part of the SMER-SD government, affecting the party's reputation and political standing in Slovakia. (Benedikovičová and Prušová)

The Slovak National Party (SNS) has been involved in several notable corruption cases over the years. One prominent scandal was the Emissions Scandal (2008-2009), where the Slovak government, during the SNS's tenure in the coalition, sold its excess carbon emissions permits at significantly below market value. This deal, criticized for its lack of transparency and accountability, resulted in substantial financial losses for the state. Another related case is the Interblue Group Scandal (2008-2009), where the permits were sold to a little-known company, Interblue Group, under suspicious circumstances, leading to further public outcry and allegations of corruption. Additionally, the SNS has been implicated in various procurement scandals, where contracts were allegedly awarded to companies with close ties to party members, raising concerns about cronyism and misuse of public funds. Another significant corruption case involving SNS is the infamous bulletin-board tender scandal (2007). In this case, the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, led by SNS nominee Marian Janušek, was accused of awarding a €120 million tender for providing consulting services for EU funds distribution in a non-transparent manner. The tender was advertised only on a bulletin board in the ministry's premises, severely limiting competition. The tender was awarded to a consortium of companies with close ties to SNS members, raising serious concerns about cronyism and misuse of public funds. The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) investigated the case, which led to the resignation of Minister Janušek and his successor, Igor Štefanov, who was also implicated in the scandal. Additionally, the SNS has faced allegations of involvement in various procurement scandals, where contracts for public projects were allegedly awarded to companies with close ties to party members or their associates. These cases have further underscored issues of cronyism and corruption within the party. For example, during SNS's control of the Ministry of Defense, there were numerous controversies over the procurement of military equipment, with accusations that tenders were rigged to benefit specific companies. The SNS's involvement in these corruption cases has had a lasting impact on its public image and has

contributed to growing cynicism and distrust among the Slovak population towards political institutions. (Pawelke)

6.1 How populism limits liberal democracy and freedom of individuals in the Slovak Republic

To elaborate on my ideas that I mention previously in my thesis that Slovak parties Smer-SSD, Hlas SD, SNS, OĽANO and Republika, clearly meet criteria according to theory, which state that they are populist.

As an important note, I need to mention that the list contains only relevant political parties, which are generally above three percent in a research of Public Opinions.

I start to prove with the latest government that got elected in September 2023 in the last parliamentary elections in the Slovak republic.

The Slovak government led by Prime Minister Robert Fico implemented several populist measures that have sparked significant controversy. One of the most contentious actions was the proposed amendments to the criminal code, which included reducing sentences for financial crimes and limiting protections for whistleblowers. These changes were widely perceived as efforts to undermine the judicial system and protect government allies from legal repercussions. (Dlhopolec)

Domestically, the government emphasized sovereignty and welfare policies, aiming to appeal to the electorate with promises of economic stability and increased welfare measures, often framed in a protectionist and nationalist manner. These measures indicate a shift towards illiberalism, with significant implications for Slovakia's democratic institutions and its standing within the European Union, leading to widespread protests and international criticism.

One major issue is the vagueness and ambiguity of some amendments, leading to differing interpretations by law enforcement and judicial authorities. This lack of clarity can result in inconsistent application of the law and create legal uncertainty. Additionally, there are significant human rights concerns, as certain amendments are perceived to infringe on personal freedoms and privacy. For example, stricter penalties and measures introduced by these amendments may be seen as disproportionate and could potentially violate fundamental rights. Moreover, the amendments often lack comprehensive public consultation and

transparency in the legislative process, leading to criticisms about the democratic legitimacy of the changes. Lastly, there are practical implementation challenges, including insufficient resources and training for law enforcement agencies to effectively enforce the new legal provisions. These issues collectively contribute to the controversies surrounding amendments to the criminal law in the Slovak Republic. The Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic may have deemed an amendment to the criminal law as constitutional for several reasons, based on legal, procedural, and substantive grounds. Firstly, the Court may have determined that the amendment aligns with the fundamental principles and specific provisions of the Slovak Constitution, ensuring it does not violate any constitutional rights or liberties. Secondly, the Court might have found that the amendment falls within the legislative competence of the Slovak Parliament, meaning the Parliament acted within its constitutional authority. Thirdly, the amendment may pursue a legitimate aim, such as enhancing public safety, combating crime, or protecting public order. The Court could have found that the measures introduced by the amendment are proportional to the aim pursued, meaning they are necessary and not excessively restrictive. Finally, the Court might have assessed that the amendment underwent proper legislative procedures, including adequate debate and consideration, ensuring its democratic legitimacy. These factors combined could have led the Constitutional Court to uphold the amendment as constitutional. (Tódová)

Having said that, it is clearly visible that the current government elected in 2023 has criminal records and donors of those parties want this amendment to take place for their own benefits and safety, which is another reason why the current coalition is populist, limiting freedom of individuals.

What was also present in that particular amendment was the cancellation of Slovak court.

The cancellation of the Special Court in Slovakia was a significant and controversial event in the country's judicial history. Established in 2004, the Special Court was designed to tackle high-profile cases involving organized crime, corruption, and other serious offenses. Its creation was part of broader efforts to enhance judicial efficiency and combat corruption. However, the court faced criticism and legal challenges over the years. Critics argued that it undermined the principle of judicial equality and created a parallel judicial system. In 2009, the Constitutional Court ruled that the establishment of the Special Court was unconstitutional, citing issues such as the selection and remuneration of judges, which were seen as violating the principles of judicial independence and equality before the law. As a

result, the Special Court was abolished, and its cases were transferred to other judicial bodies. (TASR)

This decision sparked a significant debate about the balance between judicial efficiency and the principles of fairness and equality in the legal system. Despite its abolition, the legacy of the Special Court continues to influence discussions on judicial reforms and the fight against corruption in Slovakia.

The results of the parliamentary elections were not significant for pro pro-current coalition, but were rather divided in a divided Slovakia. Therefore, obviously many people started to follow protests organized by an opposition (PS, SaS, KDĽ)

Unfortunately, it did not help and the amendment took into a play, resulting in a protection of criminals and donors to political parties of the current coalition, limiting liberal democracy and freedoms of individuals yet again.

In my opinion it is crazy and even scary how much the current government copies the steps of authoritarian politics in Hungary. I truly believe that the current government of the Slovak Republic wants to block themselves in power for many years and they would do anything in their power to make sure it would work. What I do have clearly in mind is the cancellation of RTVS, which is a public TV and a radio and regulating its content.

The potential cancellation of RTVS (Radio and Television of Slovakia), the public broadcasting service in Slovakia, could pose several significant dangers and challenges. Firstly, it would lead to the loss of independent media, as RTVS is one of the few public broadcasters providing relatively unbiased news and programming. This could result in a media landscape dominated by private companies with specific commercial or political interests, thereby reducing media plurality. Secondly, the cancellation could impact democracy, as public broadcasters play a crucial role in providing citizens with the information necessary to make informed decisions. Limiting access to diverse viewpoints and independent journalism would undermine the democratic process. Additionally, the cultural impact would be significant, as RTVS produces and broadcasts a variety of cultural, educational, and locally relevant content that private broadcasters might not prioritize. Lastly, the cancellation could reduce the quality and accessibility of media services for the public, as commercial broadcasters may not cover less profitable areas or topics with the same depth

and commitment. Overall, the removal of RTVS would have far-reaching implications for media independence, democracy, cultural representation, and public access to information in Slovakia. (AP team)

To elaborate and provide my valuable insights, I have to say that one of the key factors in my opinion, why Smer- SSD won the parliamentary elections and created a coalition after the last parliamentary elections is the fact that they ignored a mainstream media and used to go to alternative media, whose owners are directly or not directly connected to the aforementioned political parties. Names of such media are E-Report, TV Slovan, Zem a Vek, Bádateľ and many more. Another problem with those media is that they are pro- russian oriented, therefore they support the aggressor in an Ukrainian- Russian conflict, while taking money from Russia.

Politicians from a current coalition up to this day still go to those media companies, because they provide them a platform for disinformation and influence. The difference between a regular normal media in a functioning liberal democracy and disinformation media is in the content obviously, but mostly in what type of journalism they produce. While disinformation media do not ask critical questions and do not make an opposition, regular media do.

I am truly convinced that one of the key factors that helped a current coalition win the elections in September 2023, was specifically the huge influence that those disinformation media have combined with social media.

The text "Where there is Social Media there is Politics" by Karine Nahon discusses the intrinsic link between social media and politics, highlighting how social media platforms are not neutral and are deeply embedded with political biases and power dynamics. It argues that every aspect of social media, from its architecture to the information flows, is influenced by political forces. Social media politics involves the actions of various stakeholders—users, platforms, and third parties—who exercise power to shape content, agenda, and norms. The chapter further delves into the politics of curated flows, where the act of organizing and managing information after it is posted is also politically charged. The conclusion emphasizes that decisions related to social media algorithms and content curation are heavily influenced by political biases, challenging the notion that cyberspace could ever be independent of the governing institutions and cultural contexts that created it. (Nahon)

Based also on academic literature, we can witness a trend that considers the fact that social media are not as regulated as they should have been, keeping in mind the outrageous amount

of disinformation and manipulation of public opinion from certain politicians and political parties.

On the other hand, since varieties of populism occur in the Slovak Republic, it is present not only in a current coalition, but all over the spectrum and in opposition, as well as, parties that are out of parliament.

OLANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) can be considered a populist party due to several key characteristics and strategies that align with populist ideology. Firstly, OLANO has consistently positioned itself as an anti-establishment force, appealing to widespread discontent with traditional political elites and promising to represent the "ordinary people" against a corrupt and out-of-touch elite. This rhetoric is a hallmark of populist movements, which often portray themselves as the true voice of the common people in opposition to a privileged and self-serving political class.

OLANO has utilized direct and emotionally charged communication to connect with voters, frequently bypassing conventional media channels and employing social media to reach and mobilize supporters. This approach enhances their image as a movement rooted in the concerns and frustrations of the average citizen, rather than a conventional political party. Their emphasis on transparency, anti-corruption measures, and promises to overhaul the political system also resonate with populist themes, emphasizing a moral struggle between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite.

So, OLANO's leader, Igor Matovič, has often engaged in dramatic and highly publicized actions, such as organizing referendums, leading protests, and using provocative language to draw attention to the party's agenda. This performative aspect is typical of populist leaders, who seek to create a strong personal connection with their base and to portray themselves as charismatic champions of the people's will.

To sum up, OLANO's anti-establishment stance, direct communication style, focus on moral dichotomies, and the charismatic leadership of Igor Matovič align with the core tenets of populist politics, making it a quintessential example of a populist party in the Slovak political landscape.

Outside of parliament we can see a strong political party named Republika, whose popularity is rising. In the last election, Republika did not get enough support, because the party voters

decided to vote for Smer-SSD instead. Smer- SSD started using more radical and extremist rhetorics and they have very similar voters. Those voters were afraid, because exit polls showed that Progresívne Slovensko could potentially win the elections, so they decided to go for a Smer- SSD instead.

Considering that Republika has been in a parliament in the past, nowadays we should not take it for granted.

Republika may advocate for direct democracy measures, suggesting that decisions should be made directly by the people rather than through traditional representative democratic processes. This approach underscores their appeal to popular sovereignty and distrust of conventional political institutions. The party's platform probably includes policies aimed at addressing the immediate concerns and grievances of the general population, such as economic inequality, immigration, and national sovereignty, often framed in a way that resonates emotionally with the public. Their communication style is likely straightforward and direct, using simple, accessible language to connect with a broad audience, further exemplifying populist tactics.

Moving on to a next theme, which clarifies the populist nature of a current coalition is a fact of what they promise to do before elections and what they actually do.

Before the 2023 elections, the Smer-SSD party, led by Robert Fico, made several key promises. They emphasized a strong stance on foreign policy, particularly regarding the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Smer-SSD pledged to support humanitarian aid to Ukraine but firmly opposed military aid, arguing that it only served to prolong the conflict and exacerbate civilian suffering. They promised to assess any proposed sanctions based on their effectiveness and their economic and social impacts on Slovakia. Additionally, Smer-SSD committed to supporting EU-led diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict and restore peaceful relations between Slovakia, the EU, and Russia. Domestically, they promised to reform the criminal justice system by scrapping the Special Prosecutor's Office, which handled high-level corruption cases, and lowering penalties for financial crimes, claiming these changes were necessary to address human rights concerns and align with EU standards. They promised cheaper groceries and peace for Slovak people, higher incomes, higher standard of living, higher pensions...of course every rational thinking person could say that all of this could not be possible to achieve, because the Slovak economy is not able to do so. (Bárdy)

Unfortunately, society is so polarized and has been for many years, hence why they believed yet again

7. Conclusion

This Bachelor's thesis supervised by Dr. Franek and written by me on a topic “ Populism in the Slovak Republic and its Threats has a main research question, which is how can populism be a threat to liberal democracy and freedom of the individuals?

The thesis focuses on the period following the parliamentary elections of September 2023, aiming to determine whether the current populist government endangers democratic norms and individual freedoms, I outline a two-pronged methodological approaches: political-philosophical theoretical research to define populism and its implications, and empirical research to analyze the current Slovak government's legislative actions. The study examines historical, political, economic, and social factors contributing to the rise of populism in Slovakia, with a focus on the threats it poses to liberal democracy. Key topics include the erosion of democratic institutions, attacks on media freedom, and the exacerbation of social divisions.

I truly believe that I am successful in providing facts and proving that this government is populist and that it is an issue. Trying to destroy the system of checks and balances through corruption and put “their people” in charge of important institutions. This is in my opinion the biggest problem of democracy in Slovakia- that there is a corrupt elite on the top and it reaches down to all levels in society. The thesis highlights the significant challenges populism poses to liberal democracy, such as the erosion of democratic institutions, attacks on media freedom, and the exacerbation of social divisions. Populist leaders often undermine the independence of institutions, concentrate power in the executive branch, and weaken the system of checks and balances. They may also discriminate against marginalized groups and disregard the rule of law, leading to a decline in civil liberties and social cohesion.

Having said that and examining populism in Slovakia, centralization of power (which is a goal of a current coalition), leads to authoritarian practices and diminishes the accountability of a government, which limits fairness and justice. On the other hand, liberal democracy should respect individual rights, the rule of law, separation of power and pluralist society. In my humble opinion, the thesis explains its hypothesis and research question.

7.1 Summary

The thesis aims to determine whether the current populist government endangers democratic norms and individual freedoms through a dual-methodological approach involving political-philosophical theoretical research and empirical analysis of legislative actions. It defines populism as a political approach that pits the common people against a corrupt elite, often leading to the erosion of democratic institutions, attacks on media freedom, and the exacerbation of social divisions. It provides a detailed examination of the historical, political, economic, and social factors contributing to populism in Slovakia, highlighting the challenges it poses to democratic governance. By focusing on how populist leaders undermine the independence of institutions, concentrate power, and weaken the rule of law, the thesis underscores the significant threats populism poses to liberal democracy in Slovakia.

7.2 Limitations

The reliance on current legislative actions and political developments means that the conclusions may be affected by rapidly changing political dynamics, which could alter the landscape of populism and its impact on democracy. The thesis may also be constrained by the availability and reliability of data, especially in terms of accessing detailed information about government actions and policies. Furthermore, the theoretical framework used to define and analyze populism might be subject to interpretation, and different scholars might offer varying definitions or perspectives on populism and its implications. Finally, the empirical analysis may be limited by the methods employed, such as the specific criteria used to assess legislative actions and their impact on liberal democracy, which could influence the findings and their robustness. These limitations suggest that while the thesis provides valuable insights, its conclusions should be considered within the context of these potential constraints.

7.3 Future Prospects

In this thesis there can be found several avenues for further research. One prospect is a longitudinal study to observe how populism evolves over time in Slovakia and its long-term impacts on democratic institutions and individual freedoms. As I state in my thesis, populism occurred in the Slovak Republic since the 1990s and most certainly it would be a problem in future, since its long tradition. Comparative studies could be conducted to examine the rise and effects of populism in other countries, like for example in Czech Republic, which will have parliamentary elections soon, so allowing for a broader understanding of populism's implications in different contexts and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. Another future prospect is to investigate the role of social media and digital platforms in the spread and reinforcement of populist rhetoric and ideologies. Furthermore, exploring the effectiveness of various countermeasures and policy responses to populism could provide valuable insights for strengthening democratic resilience. Interdisciplinary research incorporating insights from political science, sociology, and economics could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of populism and its threats to liberal democracy. These future prospects can help build a more nuanced and holistic understanding of populism and inform strategies to mitigate its adverse effects on democratic governance.

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