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Perceptions of Slovak Politicians and their Discursive Reification at the Celebrations of the Slovak National Uprising in 2016¹

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Introduction

National holidays related to days marking significant historical events and the public celebrations of these holidays form an important research terrain for the study of current political processes. Holidays and their celebrations do not only serve as a remembrance of a (more or less glorious) past, they are a fundamental mechanism that serves to preserve the dominant political and normative order. Suitable and desired perceptions of events such as the Slovak National Uprising (SNU)² play an important role in national mythology also because they create and eternalize specific cultural notions, thus strengthening political order. This is because political order is supported by references to a suitably organized past – something every ideology (*ergo* the basis of political order) needs in order to look natural³.

“All national histories, although they seem to have taken place in the past, actually deal mainly with the present and perceive the past through the prism of interpretations required by the present.”⁴

¹ This paper is a part of the project *Political Order, Legitimacy of Political Power and Transformation of Discourse: Some Questions of Applied Political Theory* (code number SGS-2016-030) financed by Student Grant Competition at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

² The Slovak National Uprising is a term for events that took place before the end of the Second World War, when an anti-Fascist uprising broke out in Central Slovakia's main city of Banská Bystrica. The uprising fought against German troops and at the same time against the Slovak state, which was an ally of Germany. The uprising (despite the fact that it was quelled fairly quickly) is generally considered to be one of the most significant events of Slovak history and a milestone of Slovak statehood in the dominant discourse.

³ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Antropologie multikulturních společností: Rozumět identitě*, Triton, Prague, 2007; Terry Eagleton, *Ideology. An Introduction*, Verso, London, 2007.

⁴ Petra Košťálová, *Stereotypní obrazy a etnické mýty. Kulturní identita Arménie*, SLON, Prague, 2012, p. 63.

A convenient past can be used to justify various political steps and decisions⁵ made by politicians, who shield their efforts behind references made about glorious histories. And, because historical events can be interpreted in different manners, they can be used to legitimize often contradicting political demands – something we deal with in the article below.

SNU is without a doubt one of the most significant events of Slovak national history and mythology. It plays a crucial role in public debate and holds large significance for contemporary political order⁶. SNU and its celebrations play an important role in the symbolic affirmation of Slovak statehood by referring back to former successes. Thus, it is possible to refer to arguments made by Ernst Gellner⁷, who claims that states and nations to a large degree artificially (re)construct their past while highlighting potential successes and attempting to evoke the appearance of an “old-timeyness” and glorious national history.

In addition to the events themselves, the observance of these events is also important for the dominant political order. Then former (and now again incumbent) Prime Minister Robert Fico proclaimed that 2008 was a year for strengthening Slovak national identity. In one of his most recent interviews, he confirmed this stance by stating that he and other political representatives were attempting to express their attitude toward Slovak history by participating in public events. By making these statements, he defined the line along which political representatives would become active in the process of commemorating and canonizing selected events in history, *e.g.* via their presence at public events related to these historical events (or national myths)⁸. Fico does in fact regularly attend a whole array of public events that are related to various aspects of Slovak history – *e.g.* their relations with Hungary, the origin of Slovak statehood, or the legacy of the WWII-era Slovak State and the Slovak National Uprising⁹. All of this can be reflected in the collective identities of post-communist Slovakia¹⁰.

The aim of this paper is to provide a complex dramaturgical analysis of the celebrations of the 72nd anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising (SNU)

⁵ Jan Randák, “Historie v současném i budoucím veřejném prostoru – úvahy o dějinách a paměti”, *Forum Historiae*, vol. II, no. 1, 2008, p. 14.

⁶ *e.g.* Silvia Miháliková, “Sviatky na Slovensku ako súčasť politických rituálov”, *Historický časopis*, vol. LIII, no. 2, 2005, pp. 339-354.

⁷ Ernst Gellner, *Pluh, meč a kniha. Struktura lidských dějin*, CDK, Brno, 2001; *Idem, Nacionalismus*, CDK, Brno, 2003.

⁸ Miroslav Michela, “Pripomínanie a kanonizovanie minulosti. Úvaha na margo niektorých diskusií o dejinách Slovenska”, *Forum Historiae*, vol. II, no. 1, 2008, p. 8.

⁹ See *e.g.* Petr Krčál, Vladimír Naxera, “Veřejné akce jako divadelní představení”, *Central European Political Studies Review*, vol. XII, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1-23.

¹⁰ Petra Burzová, *Okouzlení pohledem na dav. Principy uzavření a meze postsociální slovenské identifikace*, SLON, Prague, 2014.

that took place on August 29, 2016 in Banská Bystrica, the center of the uprising. The city is also home to the Museum of SNU, and it holds an extensive annual day-long celebration with an accompanying cultural program that often takes place over the course of several days. Data for the analysis was constructed via semi-participant observation of these celebrations. Our analysis has been carried out in two main lines. The first is the line that we will call organizational, and the theoretical-methodological tool for carrying it out will be E. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. In this line, we will focus on factors such as the technical organization of the event, its security measures, the memorial ceremony, the formal elements of speeches given by attendees, or the actual selection of the speakers themselves. This selection is a certain reflection of the speakers' political capital, which they increase through their presence at such an event. We can label the second line as the line of discursive production. In this context, we will focus on the discourses that are (re)produced and the demands that are legitimized by the individual speakers on the topic of SNU's legacy, i.e. the content of their performances¹¹.

Before we move on to discuss both lines of argumentation, it would be suitable at this point to introduce Erving Goffman's dramaturgical apparatus used for our analysis.

Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Framework

In this section, we will focus on the brief characteristics of dramaturgical analysis. Erving Goffman views the behavior of individuals and their presentation in public events as a carefully prepared and planned theater performance. In terms of these theater performances, the performers attempt to bring about and maintain the situational definitions they require and select a symbolic environment, date, and backdrops to support their efforts¹². While using this methodological framework, it is appropriate to draw from a triple dichotomization of the analyzed event. The first is the division of performers present at the public event into the audience and the cast. Each of these groups must in a certain way regulate their behavior and draw on differing imperatives. The members of the cast especially strive to establish and maintain situational definitions and, in order to achieve this goal, they must proceed according to

¹¹ The discourses that we are working with are related to this year's annual round of celebrations, although they have an even broader anchoring in society-wide interpretations of SNU. The study of these celebrations is not, however, the goal of this text, as this topic has been dealt with by a number of mainly Slovak authors (A. Findor, B. Láštiová or J. Jablonický).

¹² Erving Goffman, *Všichni hrajeme divadlo. Sebeprezentace v každodenním životě*, Ypsilon, Prague, 1999.

previously set schemes and maintain dramaturgical discipline and mutual loyalty. With regard to the fact that both groups act according to differing regulatives, Goffman¹³ speaks about each performing party's ability to create and promote their own situational definition. In our case, the group of cast members is made up of present political performers, who have attempted to (re)produce their required political discourse. In the case of team presentations it is important that all members of the team must maintain a previously set scheme and must be careful not to put on a performance that could have a negative (or even destructive) impact on the presented definition of the situation¹⁴.

The next dichotomization that should be taken into consideration in terms of the analyzed events is the division of the self-representations of the performers into two main spatial regions that are, according to Goffman¹⁵ perceived as spaces that are "to a certain degree bordered by the barriers of perception". In keeping with dramaturgic analysis, these regions are dubbed front stages and back stages. These stages refer to places where interactions between the cast and the observers take place. The goal of the cast is to bring about the sensation that their performance fulfills and maintains certain norms. A performance plays out on the front stage that is aimed at presenting and strengthening the required situational definition and (re)producing a certain discourse. At the same time, this performance is bound to certain limitations of time and space and the front stage becomes a focal point of visual attention. As concerns the analyzed events in this paper, we can claim that the teams that are present at the events play out their situational definitions both on static stages and dynamic stages. The back stage provides a place for the performers to prepare for playing out their roles on the front stage. For these reasons, the space of the back stage should be divided from the public's field of view¹⁶. For the participants in the public event, the back stage often serves as a meeting space before the beginning of the public event and disappears the moment the event begins, transforming completely into the front stage.

The third dichotomization is based on the division of individual events that take place as a part of the main attraction. Specifically, these can be divided into main and secondary events. The goal of the main events is to present situational definitions. In contrast to this, secondary events serve as supporting roles to help present these definitions, and their organizational logic is subject to

¹³ *Idem, Behavior in Public Places*, The Free Press, New York, 1966; *Idem, Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1986.

¹⁴ *Idem, Všichni hrajeme divadlo...cit.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

main events¹⁷. As regards the celebrations on a whole, we can claim that the main events are created by, for example, the speeches of politicians or via memorial ceremonies. We can in turn view the secondary events as accompanying culture/entertainment programs in the form of recorded and live music or battle reenactments.

Here it would be appropriate to point out the various limitations of this approach, which can be divided into “technical” and “epistemic” limitations. The technical limit may stem from the financial or organizational difficulty of this approach, as it is crucially necessary for there to be a large number of observers at the event. A considerably large set of data with varying relevance is usually produced via this observation. Then, for the analysis, this data must be subjected to selection and processing, which at the same time creates the first epistemological problem. Much of the data can give the impression of considerable relevance and contribution in the context of the event being studied, but in the framework of a wider social and political context it proves to be irrelevant or trivial. As we claim later in the text, over the course of studying these events, the performers produced a number of various discourses that were accepted by the public. From the dramaturgical analysis perspective, it is not possible to discern whether the given discourse at the event was produced or was merely a discourse reproduced and confirmed by the “participants (performers and audience) that brought it”. This is linked to the next limitation, which is the question of whether performers are truly striving toward the production of new discourse or whether their performance can be perceived as semantic construction via which performers connect themselves to certain interpretations of the past, justifying their presence at the celebrations and in turn completely embodying the idea of “performer”¹⁸. We can also point out Gouldner’s critique of the dramaturgical approach selected in this paper. Gouldner criticizes the fact that this is a highly utilitarian approach that can be applied to the analysis of a wide spectrum of forms of behavior. The thematic “straddling” of this approach logically leads researchers to be seduced into interpreting the events they observe with a similarly wide compass in terms of topic¹⁹. For other argumentation critical of this approach, see Herber Blumer²⁰ and Alvin Gouldner²¹.

¹⁷ See Ann Branaman, Charles Lemmert (eds.), *The Goffman Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1997.

¹⁸ From the perspective of political science, we do not consider this to be a fundamental limitation, as a large portion of performers participate in events primarily to reproduce their status or, in other words, their political capital.

¹⁹ See Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, Basic Books, New York, 1970.

²⁰ Herbert Blumer, “Action vs. Interaction: Relations in Public – Microstudies of the Public Order by Erving Goffman”, *Society*, vol. IX, 1972, pp. 50-53.

²¹ Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis...cit.*

The Organizational Line of Celebrations – Dramaturgical Analysis

After having introduced the methodological framework used in this paper, we will now shift our attention to the first line of argumentation – the organizational line. This line can be introduced by stating that this year's celebrations (with regard to the participation of Slovak government elites and the number of observers) were subject to large-scale security measures²². Security gates had been set up at the entrance to the area of the memorial where the celebratory ceremony took place. All viewers had to pass through this security checkpoint, which logically caused long lines to form at the entrance to the premises. When a police officer present at the event was asked by a visitor why such measures were being taken this year, he replied, "you never know with all these Muhammadans around". Heightened security measures can be interpreted in a line that claims that the state apparatuses accented the necessity to guarantee the security of the observers (but primarily of the "performers") due to moral panic linked to the issue of terrorism. By doing so, the SNU celebrations were from an organizational perspective able to contribute to the strengthening of the image of the Slovak state apparatuses as the guarantors of security. This is because society expects these apparatuses to protect its members from sources of fear and moral panic²³. However, if we shift our view from formal security procedures, we can claim that providing security for the event took place primarily on a symbolic level, with the aim of sending the signal that state apparatuses are putting forth a maximum amount of effort to secure safety. On one hand, security gates were being used and dogs trained for bomb detection were deployed. On the other, the entrance area between the security gates was open for veterans, families with children, friends and acquaintances of the organizers, and retirees, who passed through freely. In a critical line of interpretation dealing with the perspective of organization, we can claim that these were only symbolic security provisions²⁴. This can be illustrated in the fact that the security forces immediately removed the metal-detecting security gates and ceased to monitor the entrance immediately after the political portion of the events and politicians' speeches ended. From this

²² However, the 70th anniversary celebrations in 2014 were even more interesting from a security perspective in regard to a number of government officials.

²³ David Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and Construction of Crisis*, Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 2002; compare Jana Lasicová, Jaroslav Ušiak, *Bezpečnosť ako kategória*, VEDA, Bratislava, 2012.

²⁴ Fiona Jeffries, "Reappropriating the City of Fear", *Space and Culture*, vol. XVII, no. 3, 2014, pp. 251-265.

perspective, we can claim that the security measures primarily served the “performers”, not the audience, which is, however, quite a common phenomenon and is based on the logic of ensuring the security of government officials.

In this line of analysis, we can shift our focus to what the “entrance of performers on the stage” looked like, i.e. a brief interpretation of the arrival of the politicians. This specific event can be viewed from the perspective of dramaturgical analysis as a staged theater performance serving to (re)produce the status symbols of the arriving politicians, during which the dichotomization of participants was strongly evident. On one side, there were the performers mentioned above, i.e. politicians stepping out of their vehicles and moving to the back stage. On the other, there was the audience, i.e. viewers welcoming the performers with applause and media teams broadcasting this performance to a wider audience. Before the arrival of the performers, a crowd of cheering viewers was created and gradually grew larger. The largest applause during the arrival was given to President Andrej Kiska and Prime Minister Robert Fico, who also came with the largest police escort. As they exited their vehicles, security held a more strategic position than during the entrance of the other political performers. The theatrical arrival and subsequent speeches can be perceived as the transformation of the political performers, via the event’s dramaturgy, into the roles of celebrities and political heroes, which naturally had an impact on the (re)production of their social statuses²⁵.

In addition to the political performers at the SNU celebrations performing on the stage via speech-giving, we recorded another group of political performers that attempted to induce their own situational definition. These were primarily members of the Communist Party of Slovakia, who played a narrative claiming that SNU had created a prelude to the events of 1948²⁶, while taking a stance against the policy of NATO (with banners reading e.g. “NATO is war”, “We want to live in peace”, or “We want peace”). However, this group did not symbolically disturb the dramaturgy of the event in any significant manner. On the contrary, Robert Fico was symbolically supported with applause as he played out his role, admiring the role of the Red Army in liberating Slovakia and warning against portraying contemporary Russia as the enemy.

Before the actual beginning of the political portion of the celebrations, a memorial ceremony took place, opened by military fighter jets flying over the premises. The ceremony was opened by SNU veterans who were the first to lay

²⁵ Daniel Silver, “The Moodiness of Action”, *Sociological Theory*, vol. XXIX, no. 3, 2011, pp. 199-222.

²⁶ Elena Mannová, “Piruety v inscenování minulosti. Slovenské národní povstání v proměnách času”, *Dějiny a současnost*, vol. VIII, 2008 (<http://dejinyasoucasnost.cz/archiv/2008/8/piruety-v-inscenovani-minulosti/>, 20. 9. 2016).

wreaths at the memorial²⁷. After the veterans finished, wreaths were laid by President Andrej Kiska, Chairman of the National Assembly Andrej Danko, and other (unnamed) members of Parliament, followed by Prime Minister Robert Fico and his cabinet ministers. The dramaturgical order of the “wreath-layers” again led to the confirmation of their symbolic statuses and their passage into the role of political celebrities²⁸. Former Slovak president Ivan Gašparovič played the interesting role of prop at the event, as he also took place in the wreath laying. After Gašparovič, foreign delegations began to lay wreaths at the memorial, the first of which was the Romanian minister of defense (during SNU celebrations, the fact that in addition to the Red Army the Romanian Army also played an important role in Slovakia’s liberation was highlighted several times), accompanied by the Slovak Minister of Defense. After this, wreaths were laid by a delegation of the European Union, which was disrupted by boos from people in the crowd, which can be interpreted in a line of the pro-Russian focus of the dominant performer of the SNU celebrations, Robert Fico, and a large number of his followers in the crowd²⁹. The European delegation was followed by representatives of various military, freedom-fighters, and anti-fascist associations, and also regional representatives (without the participation of Marian Kotleba, whose absence on one hand was a political “act of spite” and on the other was subject to ridicule by various political performers) and representatives of cities.

The memorial ceremony was concluded with the Slovak Republic’s national anthem, which in turn opened the political portion of the celebrations that included speeches. Before giving the stage to the political performers, the moderator of the celebrations framed SNU as “one of the greatest milestones in [Slovak] history” and labeled it an event in which “heroes stood up against evil”. Such a framing of events again served to heighten the status of the

²⁷ Here we can comment on the division of regions at this event. The front region, i.e. the front stage, was formed by a covered platform. The second stage was in the courtyard of the Museum of SNU, where the laying of wreaths took place. The wreath laying ceremony was also broadcast on a large screen on the stage. The back stage was formed by a fenced off area behind the stage. There was also an additional and specific region for wreath laying. This area was located to the side of the stage, where wreaths had been prepared and wreath-layers were gathered at the beginning of the memorial ceremony. Although it was easily visible to the audience, relaxed behavior typical for the back stage took place. At the moment the individual delegations took their places, their members “switched on” their ceremonial “mode”. Thus, this back region gradually disappeared and transformed into another front region.

²⁸ Daniel Silver, “The Moodiness of Action”, cit.

²⁹ However, as we will point out later, there were several lines of interpretation to which the audience reacted in different manners. This happened, for example, when a portion of the audience clapped for Fico’s pro-Russian speech, while another portion clapped for the pro-European speeches of other speakers. This “dramaturgical dissonance” of the cast in reality is a disruption of Goffman’s concept of team loyalty mentioned above.

political performers, as it allowed them to take advantage of this fact and through their participation transform themselves into modern-age heroes in the eyes of the public³⁰, albeit in a different context than *e.g.* “heroes of the uprising”. In addition, framing the event in this way made it possible to accentuate the relevance of discourses (re)produced by the speeches of politicians. Before we focus in more detail on the line of discursive production of SNU celebrations, it would be suitable to point out that the moment Robert Fico’s speech ended (as fourth in the order), a significant portion of viewers began to shift toward other secondary events (exhibitions of the Slovak Army, refreshment stands, etc.). Dynamic displays of military technology commenced, which quite strongly disrupted the rest of the ongoing speeches. Thus, it is evident from the dramaturgy of the event that the first four speeches (the director of the Museum of SNU, Andrej Kiska, Andrej Danko, and Robert Fico) were framed as the most important, and therefore were not disrupted by the accompanying events. The following speeches were not seen in this manner, as they were disrupted by these dynamic exhibitions. The audience viewed these speeches similarly, and began to move to the other regions of the event just after Robert Fico finished his speech.

The Line of Discursive Production – Analysis of Speeches

After introducing the organizational line, we will now focus on the line of discursive production. In terms of the individual speeches given, we will highlight the way in which individual performers interpret the legacy of SNU (and the accompanying legacy of the existence of the Slovak State during the period of the Second World War). The first to perform was the director of the Museum of SNU, who is the annual organizer and host of the celebrations. We registered the very first words of his performance as analytically relevant, as these words were addressed directly to the participants of the uprising – something that does not always happen at such events. As an example, we can cite the Liberation Festival celebrations in Pilsen, Czech Republic, which take place under the veneer of expressing gratitude to the American veterans who liberated the city, but in reality place these veterans in the role of mere stage props during the celebrations, who are then used by political performers to legitimize their own demands³¹. In many respects, the event in Banská Bystrica

³⁰ Daniel Silver, “The Moodiness of Action”, *cit.*

³¹ Petr Krčál, Vladimír Naxera, “‘Díky, Ameriko!’: Dramaturgická analýza Slavností svobody v ‘nejameričtějším’ městě Evropy”, *Central European Political Studies Review*, vol. XVII, no. 3-4, 2015, pp. 313-338.

focused on veterans in a more targeted manner, which was evident in the order in which the host welcomed the guests, emphasizing that he was breaking protocol by first welcoming the veterans and not government officials. As a reason, he stated that he considered the veterans to be the most important of all the guests³². In addition to government officials, he welcomed by name the former president Gašparovič, who began the tradition of the Slovak president's presence at these events. After a number of other representatives were named, he welcomed the "representatives of the Banská Bystrica region" and added, "I don't have to explain why the district administrator is not here, but I felt I should make the comment", which was met by applause from the audience. The majority of the speeches given took a symbolic stance against extremist Marian Kotleba³³, who stands as head of the region. The negative perception through which Kotleba interprets SNU is evident in the fact that a specific defensive discourse has been created against his interpretation³⁴, which has attempted to marginalize Kotleba's opinions and defend the official narrative of SNU³⁵. At the very end of his speech, he thanked the director of the museum and Prime Minister Fico for their promise to allot finances for the modernization of the museum in order to create a whole new exhibition for the 75th anniversary celebration. As far as the (re)production of discourse is concerned, the comment above on Kotleba seems to us to be the most relevant and significant in terms of the director's speech.

The second individual to perform was Andrej Kiska. Although his speech contained various glorifying phrases for SNU (for instance "Despite their military defeat, the participants in the uprising were triumphant in their battle for the character of Slovakia") that were given in almost the same exact

³² Wreath-laying first by veterans and then by government officials has taken place since the Museum of SNU was inspired by a similar phenomenon during the celebrations of the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. The goal is to emphasize the priority of the veterans over the participants in the events.

³³ See Pavel Maškarinec, Petr Bláha, "Křivda jako příležitost pro nové politické strany? Kotleba – Lidová strana Naše Slovensko na cestě parlamentu", *Politics in Central Europe*, vol. XII, no. 2S, 2016, pp. 45-66.

³⁴ Vladimír Naxera, Petr Krčál, "The Slovak National Uprising as A National Treasure? Interpretation and Legacy of the SNU in Slovak Political Discourse and National Mythology", *Annual of Language & Politics and Politics of Identity*, vol. X, no. 1, 2016, pp. 83-102.

³⁵ In a number of speeches given, Kotleba was not directly mentioned but only referred to in various allusions, as we also mention in excerpts from the speeches below. It is fairly likely that these references may not have been aimed solely at Kotleba, as there are a number of extremist politicians casting doubt on SNU and celebrating the existence of the Slovak State that existed during WWII. However, in the local context of Banská Bystrica, which is directly linked to Kotleba's person, the interpretation that these references directly allude to Kotleba is highly probable.

manner a year earlier³⁶, there were several differences between the two speeches. The largest difference was the mention of the Slovak State that existed during the Second World War. In his speech a year prior, Kiska, like the other speakers, seemed to forget about the existence of this state and its alliance with Germany altogether. In this year's speech, he referred to its existence in a negative manner: "The events of the Slovak National Uprising returned Slovakia its honor [...] We must speak of the uprising as one against evil – one against Nazism and Fascism outwardly, but also against the Slovak regime". Other speakers made similar statements this year as well. Kiska went on to mention that SNU is one of the roots of the contemporary Slovak state and Slovak democracy³⁷ – and democracy is a value shared by all of Europe. "Thanks to the uprising, we can stand here as proud citizens of a republic and as free Europeans." This rhetorical shift toward Europe and the EU and the fact that Slovakia was moved closer to Europe thanks to SNU formed a common strain in a number of other speeches given at this year's celebrations, Robert Fico being the only fundamental exception. Kiska continued on in searching for parallels between the period of the uprising and the present: the participants of the uprising overcame their political, ideological and religious disputes and agreed that freedom and equality of race and religion are the most important values. According to Kiska, these values are also valid in contemporary Slovak society and it is important to actively defend them. It is not possible to espouse SNU and at the same time tolerate the view that SNU was a black dot in Slovak history, which we can view here as a clear stance against Kotleba's perception of SNU and the Slovak State³⁸. At present, neo-Nazism, xenophobia, and hatred shall not be tolerated, and no compromises should be made with the proponents of these ideas. Kiska said tolerating them was "a defiance of the nation, but a disgrace to man". It is not possible to celebrate the uprising against fascism and at the same time tolerate the fascists of the present. This line of his speech can be interpreted as a stance against Marian Kotleba, and not only against his interpretation of SNU, but against extremist populism (see Kotleba's nationalist/Nazi "patrols" in trains, etc.) and his success in elections to the National Assembly this year.

The next to give a speech was Andrej Danko, the Chairman of the National Assembly elected for the nationalist Slovak National Party, replacing the former and (to put it lightly) controversial Ján Slota. In his introduction, Danko claimed he regretted the fact that the historical legacy of SNU has

³⁶ Vladimír Naxera, Petr Krčál, "The Slovak National Uprising as A National Treasure?...", cit.

³⁷ This shows that the present dominant discourse interprets the significance of SNU for subsequent development completely differently than the discourse that was propagated after 1948 – in this discourse, SNU was only a prelude to the events of February 1948. Elena Mannová, "Píruety v inscenování minulosti...", cit.

³⁸ Vladimír Naxera, Petr Krčál, "The Slovak National Uprising as A National Treasure?...", cit.

divided contemporary Slovak society: “History should teach us, not divide us”. Danko based the introduction of his speech on a theory that is strongly rooted in Slovak political discourse³⁹, which claims that the nation of Slovaks had fought for centuries for its own state. When this state was finally created during the Second World War, Slovaks in their hearts knew they had gained their own statehood, but one that was not completely right – i.e. their hearts provided the impulse for SNU to begin. Just as sense was driven by the heart at the time of the uprising, it should also be driven thus today. It is necessary to defend the legacy of those who fought in the uprising, who showed the world that Slovaks are not xenophobes, that they are not evil, and that they have a heart – so, today it is necessary to show the world this heart and to prove that Slovaks are capable of welcoming members of other countries with hospitality and open arms. In addition, Danko called Slovakia a strong part (and actually used the term “heart”) of Europe and the European Union and stated he was proud to be a member of the government of a European state that he need not be ashamed of. This was met by a loud round of applause from the audience.

The final speech from high-ranking government officials was given by Prime Minister Robert Fico, whose words strongly differed in content and direction from those of the other orators. To a large degree, the speech was reminiscent of last year’s celebrations, during which Fico delivered a strongly anti-refugee and anti-European speech while other speakers called for solidarity with refugees⁴⁰. The topic of opposing the acceptance of refugees, which he backed up with the necessity to protect the legacy of the anti-fascist fighters, was completely ignored by Fico in 2016 and replaced by another emphasized topic. After making a short introductory claim that SNU was a domestic Slovak opportunity and not an import from the East or West, he announced that he would now shift his focus from August 29, 1944 (the day the uprising began) to August 29, 2016 in today’s Banská Bystrica: “We can all probably agree that Slovakia is a safe country and we take [products in stores, education, ...] for granted; we take things for granted that do not exist in other countries”. He noted that although his government makes mistakes, the country is run professionally and it has secured the security of its citizens. He also stated that the country has everything it needs for the future, but this feeling of security should not lead Slovaks to become complacent. Thus, this narrative precisely depicts the fact that political actors at public events attempt to place themselves

³⁹ Lubomír Lupták, “Postkomunismus a národné mýty”, in Ladislav Cabada (ed.), *Komparace politických systémů. Nové demokracie střední a východní Evropy*, Oeconomica, Prague, 2008, pp. 37-65.

⁴⁰ Vladimír Naxera, Petr Krčál, “Obrazy ne-bezpečnosti v projevech slovenských politiků”, *Politics in Central Europe*, vol. XII, č. 1S, 2016, pp. 49-61; *Idem*, “The Slovak National Uprising as A National Treasure?...”, cit.

in the roles of heroes in the eyes of the observers⁴¹. The Prime Minister continued by expressing his fears (“my soul is troubled”) concerning three issues. The first was that a number of political entities have chosen hatred at their main program, “which is a path that leads to hell”. Here we can note the Prime Minister also took a symbolic stance against Marian Kotleba, the same as the year prior; however, this expressed aversion to hatred slightly contrasts to the focus of Fico’s own speech the year before⁴², although we can assume that this speech was dictated more by populism than actual hatred. By expressing his position against hatred, Fico not only took a stance against Kotleba, but to a certain degree also laid the grounds for the rest of his speech. The second issue that Fico expressed concern about was the question of using weapons. He expressed his fears over the result of British Prime Minister Theresa May’s visit to Slovakia. When May was asked if she would use nuclear weapons, she answered “yes” without hesitation. According to Fico, people like May should be reminded of the legacy of the Second World War, when whole cities and nations were destroyed. Fico also called on all people to think twice about making strong statements on the use of weapons and thus laid the groundwork for his third comment. His final concern dealt with the idea that Slovaks were looking for scapegoat for all of their own problems⁴³. He emphasized his refusal of any antipathy toward Russian-Slovak ties while making it implicitly clear that the culprit responsible for this antipathy was the European Union. The Soviet Union had the lion’s share of defeating the Nazis and Russia should not be made out as the enemy. All three of these voiced concerns (fear of hatred, fear of using weapons, and fear of looking for a scapegoat) helped create the complex rhetorical mechanism for Fico’s swing toward Russia, which he confirmed in his proclaimed long-term foreign policy direction. “We must be more sovereign and state our own opinions, even if we are a small nation.” This declaration can be seen as the continuation of this implicit stance against the European Union and the “dictation of Brussels”. Robert Fico was thus the only speaker at this year’s and last year’s celebrations to defend an alliance with Russia on one hand and speak out against the European Union on the other – in 2016 more implicitly and in 2015 more explicitly. In his final conclusion, he expressed his wish for next year’s celebrations to be not only a commemoration of SNU, but also celebrations of peace (which we can see again as an implicit demand for peaceful relations with Russia), which was greeted with a great

⁴¹ See Daniel Silver, “The Moodiness of Action”, cit.

⁴² Vladimír Naxera, Petr Krčál, “Obrazy ne-bezpečnosti...”, cit. ; *Idem*, “The Slovak National Uprising as A National Treasure?...”, cit.

⁴³ Here we can reiterate the discordance with the speech Fico made one year prior, which he used to blame migrants, the EU, and also implicitly Romas for various problems in Slovakia. The issue of Romas is also characteristic of Fico’s rhetoric, albeit in a significantly milder manner than that of *e.g.* Kotleba.

round of applause and made Fico the only speaker of the occasion to receive such plaudits during a speech.

The next to appear was Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič, whose speech was in great contrast to the one made by Fico. Compared to the first speaker's at the occasion, Šefčovič's speech even more strongly emphasized Slovakia's pro-democratic and pro-European orientation as a result of SNU. To a certain degree, he presented opinions that were closer to President Kiska: "Participants in the Slovak National Uprising were not afraid to stand up against a regime that they disagreed with", which prepared the grounds for contemporary Slovak democracy and Slovakia's role as a part of a democratic Europe. Šefčovič acknowledged the negative aspects of the existence of the Slovak WWII-era state and explicitly mentioned the Holocaust that Slovakia had actively taken part in. In his words, this was a reason in itself to commemorate those who rose up against the regime. Not just the participants in the uprising, but Slovakia as a whole showed where their country belonged – among European democratic states. This is today refuted by individuals who spread hatred and xenophobia in the attempts to isolate Slovakia from the rest of Europe. Slovakia should remember the price it paid for accepting Fascism and Nazism, and should recognize the value of its democratic institutions and membership in the EU, the greatest benefit of which is the fact that conflict among the member states is made undesirable and infeasible. The largest problems the contemporary EU faces are ones such as the "Brexit", which in Šefčovič's words were the product of misleading propaganda. Due to the threat of the EU's dissolution, which could lead to additional conflicts among European nations, Slovaks should remind themselves of their history. Šefčovič sees democracy and the European Union as institutions that carry a number of faults, but also views them as the best system created so far and is one that has brought Slovaks much benefit. In his words, support for democracy and the EU should stem from the knowledge of one's own history.

Romanian Minister of Defense Mihnea Motoc spoke second to last. Romanian political representatives regularly attend the celebrations in Banská Bystrica, as a large number of Romanian soldiers took part in the liberation of Slovakia at the end of the war. Roughly ten thousand Romanian soldiers lost their lives in these operations. In his speech, Mihnea Motoc paid tribute to the memory of the fallen and thanked the Slovaks for continuing this commemoration. Relations between Romania and Slovakia are above standard, but it is important for all NATO and EU nations to have good ties in order to deepen integration. SNU was an event that began a new era for Slovakia and was also "[...] a part of the timeless line connecting yesterday, today, and tomorrow". This statement was strongly similar to the frequent Slovak interpretation that attempts to create a historical line between Samo's Empire or

Great Moravia and the present and to narrate individual historical events accordingly⁴⁴.

The last to speak was Pavol Sečkář, Chairman of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, who emphasized the need to know one's history: "We should be proud of our national history, written by our national heroes". In his words, classes on patriotic education and history are in decline, which points to the fact that contemporary Slovaks often behave irrationally. Examples of this irrationality, which Sečkář says he is unable to grasp, are Nazism, Fascism, and racism. In his words, these beliefs are still alive in Slovakia, even in the highest political spheres of the country: "After the elections to the National Council, skinheads that had once been yelling 'siege heil' in the streets are now lounging in the seats of Parliament". He stated that Kotleba not only hated SNU, but was also damaging the region as its head administrator through his activities or the lack thereof⁴⁵.

Having presented the speeches, we can now summarize two individual conclusions that stem from the analysis. The first conclusion is that this year's speeches were strongly influenced by the significant success of Marian Kotleba in the parliamentary elections, which was further strengthened by the context of Banská Bystrica where Kotleba holds the post of district administrator. This has made its mark on the anti-fascist tone of the speeches, which in comparison to last year's speeches not only targeted the Fascism of the Second World War, but the Fascism of the present (there were mentions of Kotleba last year, although they were more of a derisive nature only). The second conclusion is that Robert Fico's speech transgressed the line of other speeches given mainly in terms of its content. Fico mentioned the issue of SNU only in passing and immediately shifted to pushing his political agenda of orientation toward Russia.

⁴⁴ Lubomír Lupták, "Postkomunismus a národné mýty", cit.

⁴⁵ Here we can claim that Pavol Sečkář's speech was to a large degree in contradiction to the speeches made by representatives of the Czech Freedom Fighters Union (CFFU) at various occasions not dissimilar to SNU celebrations. As an example, we can cite the speech made by CFFU Chairman Jaroslav Vodička during the memorial service for the victims of the Holocaust in Terezín, which the Federation of Jewish Communities labeled xenophobic. Another example is the speech given by the Chairman of Pilsen's regional branch of the Czech Freedom Fighters during an assembly taking place during the city's Liberation Festival 2016. In this speech, he stated that "a wave of members of a foreign culture surging into Europe" is debasing the memory of fallen antifascist fighters. As of late, there have been reports not only of a whole score of questionable political and religious representatives joining its ranks, but also of its increasingly nationalist and openly xenophobic diatribes. We are left with no other choice but to state that the perception of the term "freedom" which the Union bears in its name is a relatively specific one.

Final Connections of the Lines of Analysis

If we summarize the conclusions, we may state that the celebrations of the anniversary of SNU play a crucial role in current Slovak politics. From an organizational perspective, the celebrations serve to (re)produce the political statuses of the participants (and primarily the speakers), and at the same time fulfill the premise that state apparatuses should ensure the security of their citizens. As we have already mentioned, although they were mostly symbolic, the security measures were strong due to moral panic⁴⁶ and the presence of government representatives. This was reflected mainly in the fact that the security measures became virtually non-existent after the speeches were finished and the politicians departed, as these measures were aimed only at political performers. Even so, we may still claim that these measures fulfilled the expectations of the public.

(In)security was to a strong degree a connecting factor of both lines of analysis, as a number of speeches were aimed at highlighting phenomena that could pose threats. This year it was dominated by topics concerning the issue of political extremism, primarily neo-Nazism and neo-Fascism. In this sense, Robert Fico was an exception, as he mentioned extremism only in passing and focused more on the problem that in his view has arisen from the EU's ostracism of Russia. At the same time, he backed up his argument by referring to SNU and the end of the Second World War, which he interpreted (at least in the Slovak context) as the success of the Red Army. By doing so, Fico continued on in the same vein as his speech from the year prior, in which he clearly declared this attitude toward Russia and "enriched" his speech with harsh criticisms of the EU and its supposed dictation, especially in the issue of migration and migration quotas⁴⁷. In this sense, Fico's long-term rhetoric is becoming closer in nature to the rhetoric of a whole score of other V4 representatives, who are joined together by a more or less explicit refusal of Brussels and migrants, who present a fundamental security threat. At the same time, this rhetoric shows a certain degree of adoration of the Kremlin and its international political direction⁴⁸. In conclusion, we will take the opportunity to make a normative note based on our concept of social science as an engaged science – in the Czech environment, President Miloš Zeman symbolizes this position of "the Kremlin's troubadour" in his anti-European and pro-Kremlin worldview, which is not dissimilar to that of Fico.

⁴⁶ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Oral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Routledge, Oxon, 2011.

⁴⁷ Vladimír Naxera, Petr Krčál, "Obrazy ne-bezpečnosti...", cit.; *Idem*, "The Slovak National Uprising as A National Treasure?...", cit.

⁴⁸ See Magda Leichtová, *Misunderstanding Russia*, Asghate, Surrey, 2014.