Conditions and Limits of Programmatic Party Competition in Slovakia

Rybář, Marek

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Conditions and Limits of Programmatic Party Competition in Slovakia*

Marek Rybář

Abstract: *The article aims to assess the extent of transformation of the Slovak party political scene since the 2002 general election. It does so by focusing on three interrelated questions. First, what were the origins of the ascendance of the left-right political competition after 2002? Second, have there been significant differences between party organizational changes before and after 2002 e? Third, how have the second-order election during the 2002-06 parliamentary term influenced the course of party political developments, particularly existing patterns of party interactions? It is argued that the party competition cannot be reduced to a single left-right, socio--economic dimension. Instead, three divides are identified: a socio-economic left-right divide, a cultural-conservative versus liberal division, and an ethnic Slovak-Hungarian cleavage. These divisions are significant across the population and have successfully been exploited by deliberate strategies of political parties.*

Keywords: *Slovakia, left-right competition, the 2002 parliamentary election, party competition, second-order election*

Introduction

Slovakia has often been perceived as an exceptional case among the Central European countries, having undergone a difficult political transition from Communism and followed a political trajectory different from its neighbours (e.g. Haughton, 2005). In the mid-1990s, for example, its political régime was not considered fully democratic, an evaluation that led to its initial exclusion from integration into the European Union (EU) and NATO. The country had been criticized for its treatment of ethnic minorities, and the Government had been frequently censured for its methods of limiting the rights of the legitimate political opposition. On a party political level, the dominant conflict had been characterized as a competition of authoritarian and libertarian forces, the main difference between the two competing camps of parties being the extent of political liberalism in their understanding of democracy (see Učeň, 2000: 123-125). In the 1998 parliamentary election, however, authoritarian-leaning parties were voted out of power and a broad left-to-right coalition government initiated complex processes of democratic renewal and administrative and socio-economic reforms. Following the 2002 election, which resulted in a surprisingly clear-cut victory for the centre-right parties,

Slovakia was invited to join both NATO and the EU (it joined the latter in 2004), and the overall democratic character of its political régime has since then been taken for granted both internally and internationally (Bilčík, 2001). In addition, many commentators on Slovak politics noted that the nature of party competition has been changing. The authoritarian-libertarian logic of party competition is said to have gradually been replaced by a more programmatic left-right competition (Gyárfášová, 2004: 125). Developments on the party political scene are – in new democracies perhaps more than anywhere else – driven by general election. Not only do election represent the quintessence of democratic régime, they also decide about the status of previously relevant political parties. This has certainly been the case in Slovakia, as in all post-1989 election there have either been new parties gaining parliamentary representation for the first time, or parties are losing parliamentary presence after having been previously politically relevant, or both. Thus, the timeframe of the current analysis is primarily set by the 2002 general election, even though occasional references to important events go beyond that period.

While of primary importance, however, election are not the only source of change on the party political level. Important organizational modification and ideological transformations of parties take place in the period between the general election. Frequent splits and mergers of political parties during the election cycle have been a widely acknowledged feature of many new democracies of Central Europe, and Slovakia is anything but an exception. Indeed, the "volatility of parliamentarians", i.e. party switching of members of parliament, represents a crucial source of an overall weakness of linkage between parties and voters in Eastern Europe (see Pettai and Kreuzer, 2003, Shabad and Slomczynski, 2004).

This article aims to assess the extent of transformation of the Slovak party political scene. It does so by focusing on three interrelated questions. First, what were the origins of ascendance of the left-right political competition after 2002? Second, have there been significant differences between party organizational changes after 2002 from those before that date? In other words, did changes in the new dominant logic of party competition also bring about changes in the organizational strategies of political parties and their leaders? Third, how did the second-order election during the 2002-06 parliamentary term influence the course of party political developments, particularly existing patterns of party interactions?

It is argued that while the previously dominant authoritarian-libertarian divide of party competition has faded away, it is premature to label the Slovak party competition as following a left-right (socio-economic) logic. A mixture of structural and agency--related factors did push for a more programmatic party competition. However, there have been parties as well as significant groups of voters who prefer alternative issues of political competition, primarily based on parties reflecting voters' ethnic and culturally conservative identities. In addition, the results of the second-order election seem to be conducive to further structuration of party competition. No significant new parties

emerged, and the patterns of cooperation largely copied the government-opposition divisions.

The origins of left-right competition

As Peter Učeň aptly put it when describing party competition in the 1990s: "there are several dimensions of political conflict in Slovak party politics, there is a hierarchy of these conflicts, and on the top of this hierarchy there is a conflict over the notion of politics and democratic government" (Učeň, 2000: 129). While the left-right divide of party political scene has constantly been present in Slovak post-1989 party competition, throughout the 1990s there have been other, more salient divisions and issues that shaped the character of party politics in Slovakia. That is why in the 1992-94 coalition cabinet there had been nominees both of the far-left Association of Slovak Workers and the radical nationalist Slovak National Party. Similarly, the Communist-successor leftist democrats (SDĽ) and the anti-Communist Christian Democrats (KDH) jointly shared governmental responsibility in the short-lived 1994 cabinet as well as in the 1998-2002 Government. As was argued elsewhere (e.g. Rybář, 2004), the nature of party competition has changed significantly since the 2002 parliamentary election. A combination of three factors contributed to a clear electoral victory of the centre-right: First, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) saw its worst electoral results ever, primarily due to a defection shortly before the election of a group of its prominent MPs, who were dissatisfied with being excluded from the party list for the upcoming election. Second, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) of the Prime Minister Dzurinda fared unexpectedly well, coming second just after the HZDS and ahead of the newly formed Smer party, whose programme was amorphous. Third, neither the Communist-successor the SDĽ, nor the Slovak National Party (SNS) were able to clear the 5 per cent electoral threshold, thus losing their parliamentary representation for the first time since 1990. A new centre-right coalition government controlling originally 78 out of 150 parliamentary seats was sworn in within a few weeks after the official result of the election was announced, with Dzurinda becoming a rare example in the region of a centre-right prime minister re-elected to office (Učeň and Surotchak, 2005). It is important to stress, however, that the electoral success of the Slovak centre-right in the 2002 election owes as much to factors related to its socio-economic programmes as it does to factors unrelated to left-right competition. First of all, the SDKÚ's primary electoral message focused on the need for political continuity with Dzurinda's previous (1998-2002) cabinet that was to guarantee successful conclusion of the EU entry negotiations. Thus, the SDKÚ did not present itself as a champion of radical economic reforms but as a guarantor of integration into the EU and NATO. Because Slovakia under the Mečiar administration (1994-98) was excluded from the integration mainstream, many Slovak voters were concerned about the deteriorating international position of their country and turned to parties with unquestioned international credentials. Second, it is doubtful whether the label 'centre-right'

is appropriate for the economic and social aspects of the programme of the second largest party of the new government – the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK). The party has been able to monopolize the votes of Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians, whose value orientations reveal significant inclinations to paternalism and welfare state expansion. In addition, a content analysis of the 2002 party manifesto confirmed that among the most prominent themes in the SMK's programme include social protectionist and redistributive measures alongside protection of ethnic minorities and decentralization (Berecová, 2003: 65-68). Hence, the SMK's election results are best explained by the party leaders' ability to mobilize the politically active ethnically based section of the electorate, which always votes. It is not explained by their voters' preference for liberalization in the social and economic sphere. Third, the New Citizen Alliance (ANO), a junior coalition partner in the centre-right government, based its electoral strategy on stressing its novelty and managerial competence, as the party was set up in 2001 by a group of successful individuals without previous direct political experience (Haughton and Rybář, 2004a). It should be acknowledged, however, that the ANO election manifesto clearly preached a liberal economic orthodoxy and the party consciously portrayed itself as a centre-right liberal force (Berecová, 2003: 50-54).

Similarly, parties that were confined to the parliamentary opposition status in 2002 cannot all unequivocally be described as leftist. The Communist Party (KSS), which secured parliamentary seats for the first time since 1990, has been considered as a radical leftist neo-Communist formation (Haughton – Rybář, 2004b). However, analysis of the Smer and HZDS revealed their socio-economic profiles to be less clear. Throughout the election campaign, for example, Smer "consistently avoided any references to its own leftist leanings" (Krivý, 2003: 88). Similarly, in the period before the election, the official party documents and rhetoric of the party leader pointed to a strategy of electoral mobilization based on protest against the existing political establishment, and a mixture of law and order and social welfare pledges (Učeň, 2003, Rybář, 2004b). The HZDS also represented a difficult case. While the party re-branded itself as a centre-right peoples' party in 2000 (Haughton, 2001), the economic aspects of its programme defined the party only marginally. Rather, the HZDS has been perceived by its opponents as a semi-authoritarian force that came to be an obstacle to Slovakia's democratic consolidation. Interestingly enough, a content analysis of its 2002 election manifesto showed that on a left-right scale the party is closer to the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) than to the SDKÚ, KDH and ANO (Berecová, 2003: 76-78). In other words, the 2002 coalition formation process was determined by factors more important than party manifestos. Three can be mentioned: the relatively positive experience of cooperation of the SDKÚ, SMK and KDH in the 1998-2002 cabinet; the anticipated benefits of inclusion of representatives of the country's largest ethnic minority into the government and a desire to break with the country's pre-1998 mixed democratic credentials. Thus, even though the 2002 coalition government has been labelled as the first Slovak programmatically unified cabinet (Szomolányi, 2003: 18); its homogeneity probably could not have been defined in socio-economic terms.

Whatever the reasons for the coalition government formation in 2002, the policy manifesto of the new cabinet represented an ambitious and far-reaching attempt to liberalize the existing social and economic policies. A series of policy changes was launched, bringing about extensive modifications to the country's health care, social policy, pension and tax systems, and administrative decentralization. Even though opinion polls indicated that most citizens agreed that serious reforms were needed in these sectors, the general perception of the actual policy implementation tended to be critical or even dismissive (Bútorová – Gyarfášová, 2006). Towards the end of the 2002-06 electoral cycle, however, only health care reform was rejected by a majority of voters, while the views of changes in the other sectors were more balanced and rather positive (IVO, 2005). Significant differences existed in the opinions of supporters of the governing parties and of the opposition (more supportive in the former and more critical in the latter case). What is most significant for the character of party competition, however, is that these policies were consciously presented as "liberal" and "centre-right" by both their proponents and opponents. Among the parties of the Government it was especially the core executive – the Prime Minister and the finance ministers nominated by the SDKÚ – who actively promoted the rhetoric of the left--right competition, but similar references were occasionally made by the ministers nominated by the ANO and KDH[46]. Similarly, the Smer party – since 2003 the most popular party in the opinion polls – has systematically addressed the Dzurinda administration as "rightist" and portrayed itself as the left-wing alternative to it (e.g. Smer, 2005). These activities of the party leaders have had important consequences for political self-identification of their supporters: In late 2005 a (simple) majority of the SDKÚ and KDH supporters (48 and 37 per cent, respectively) placed themselves on the right of the political spectrum, while a considerable share of potential Smer voters (39 per cent) claimed a leftist persuasion (IVO, 2005). The significance of these numbers becomes evident when seen against the levels indicated by the Slovak voters at large. In the same survey, only 14 per cent of all respondents claimed they favoured right-wing parties, with 25 per cent of them of a left-wing, political persuasion. At the same time most Slovak voters (41 per cent) placed themselves "in the centre" (IVO, 2005)

Fragmentation of the centre-right and the collapse of the cabinet

The Dzurinda four-party centre-right government formally lost its narrow parliamentary majority in 2003, when three ANO deputies left the parliamentary party groups to protest against the unexplained ways the party leadership pursued clientelist practices in the ANO-controlled Ministry of Economy. In the same year, seven parliamentarians elected on the SDKÚ ticket defected from their parliamentary faction to protest against

---

[46] Economic liberalization and a policy of systematic decrease of the level of corporatism were referred to by the Economy (ANO) and Justice (KDH) Ministers.

the way the Prime Minister-cum-party leader Dzurinda handled an intra-party dispute of apparently minor importance[47]. While the new minority status of the Government did not seriously limit its ability to pass laws through Parliament, tensions between the parties of the Government increased. In 2003 for example, the ANO submitted to Parliament a law on abortions, and the party joined the opposition to pass the statute against the will of other three coalition partners. This step led to a severe worsening of relations between the ANO and the Christian Democrats that was eventually resolved only in late 2005 (see below). Even though the law eventually did not come into force (after the President exercised his veto the ruling parties agreed to wait until the Constitutional Court decides in the matter), this episode demonstrated the existence of important differences in the centre-right camp over cultural conservative values. The ANO leaders tried to build the image of anti-clerical and modern politicians defending a secular character of the state against the culturally conservative Christian Democrats. This anti-clerical stance also found fertile ground among Slovak voters too: According to the findings of Krivý, Christian conservatism is a political value important for the supporters of the KDH, while voters with anti-clerical inclinations tend to support the KSS, Smer and ANO (Krivý, 2005: 99).

Political differences also emerged between the SMK and the other three centre-right parties over the implementation in Slovakia of the Hungarian Status Law. While the SMK welcomed this initiative of the Hungarian Government aimed at supporting financially and organizationally ethnic Hungarian minorities living in the Central European states, the other parties claimed the law was unacceptable, extraterritorial and against the provisions of the framework Slovak-Hungarian treaty on good-neighbourly relations (Mesežnikov, 2004: 41-42).

The post-2002 Slovak coalition government was thus characterized by two main dividing lines: the conservative-liberal cleavage separated the Christian Democrats from the ANO, and the ethnic Slovak-Hungarian cleavage dividing the SMK from its coalition partners. Furthermore, a number of disputes fuelled by personal animosities and patronage interests (see Láštic, 2004: 108-110) of the governing parties did not add to an image of an "ideologically homogeneous government" (Gyárfášová, 2004: 125).

It was this mixture of ideological and personality-related factors that eventually brought about the collapse of the Dzurinda coalition government. In September 2005 the ANO broke up in a dispute over the suspicious and not properly explained private financial transactions of the ANO leader Pavol Rusko, who also held the post of Minister of Economy. An overwhelming majority of the regional party organizations supported Rusko, while the majority of the ANO members of parliament found their leader's

---

[47] The SDKÚ presidency obliged all the SDKÚ-nominated cabinet ministers to support the Prime Minister's proposal to replace the head of the National Security Bureau (NBÚ). After the Minister of Defence Ivan Šimko declined to vote along party lines, the Prime Minister decided to replace him by a more loyal party member. Šimko and his supporters within the party criticized the party leader, and eventually left the SDKÚ to form the Free Forum.

activities incompatible with a proper ministerial conduct and potentially harmful to the electoral prospects of the party. Eventually, the rebels were expelled from the party at an extraordinary party congress. In turn, the Prime Minister, under pressure from the KDH, decided to dismiss Rusko from the Government and to formally terminate the coalition agreement. A new coalition agreement was signed between the three remaining parties (the SDKÚ, SMK and KDH) and the parliamentarians who were expelled from ANO[48].

The new three-party coalition, however, lasted only for less than five months. In February 2006 all three Christian Democratic government ministers resigned, and the party withdrew its support from the government. Their move was prompted by a decision of the Prime Minister Dzurinda not to include on the agenda of a cabinet session a draft of the "Vatican Treaty", long awaiting ratification in Slovakia (SME, 7 February 2006). The document, one of the key goals of the KDH, was to regulate the right of Slovak citizens to exercise "conscientious objection", e.g. the right to refuse to perform abortions, teach sex education in schools, etc. This conflict should be perceived in the light of mobilization of the core supporters of the KDH on the one hand, and an interest of the SDKÚ in the former ANO voters on the other hand. With the 2006 election looming, ANO experienced a drop in voter support, a situation that Dzurinda's SDKÚ wanted to exploit. The rump coalition government, composed by the SDKÚ and SMK agreed with the parliamentary opposition to hold early election in June 2006.

Organizational development of the parties since 2002

Frequent splits and mergers of political parties is a typical feature of Slovak politics. One of the questions accompanying the decline of the authoritarian-democratic divide since 1998 was whether the specific nature of the dominant political conflict before that date had any relation to the organizational instability of political parties. A preliminary answer seems to be positive. As it is clear from Table 1, the 1994-98 period saw the most stable composition of parliamentary party groups.

Table 1: Number of MPs who left their original parliamentary party group

	1990-92	1992-94	1994-98	1998-02	2002-06*
Number of deputies	44	25	14	37	29
%	29.3	16.7	9.3	24.7	19.3

Source: Malová – Krause (2000), Malová (2005), National Council of the Slovak Republic, author's calculations as of 1 January 2005)*

---

[48] As far as the composition of the cabinet is concerned, there was only one change: Rusko was replaced by a former ANO parliamentary deputy. Two other ministers nominated by ANO also left the party and remained in the cabinet as unaffiliated (non-party) politicians.

During the 1994-98 Mečiar government, when the country experienced a process of serious democratic backsliding, less than 10 per cent of MPs left their parliamentary faction (see Malová – Krause, 2000). It can be hypothesized that the intensity and nature of political conflict – when the stakes of the political game were high – had a bearing on the unity of parliamentary parties. On the other hand, both the period before 1994 and after 1998 witnessed an extensive instability of the parliamentary parties. Hence, the conclusion Gyárfášová (2003: 125) derived from the electoral behaviour of Slovak voters in the 2002 election, i.e. that the (authoritarian-democratic) polarity of electoral behaviour of Slovak voters was weakened in 2002 and this can be identified in the behaviour of Slovak politicians too. Indeed, the phenomenon on the part of the voters could have been prompted by the behaviour of the members of the political class. Table 2 indicates levels of political fragmentation of the Slovak Parliament in the period between election.

Table 2: Number of parties represented by individual members of parliament

	1990-92	**1992-94**	**1994-98**	**1998-2002**	**2002-06***
First Parliamentary Session	9	6	12	6	7
Last Parliamentary Session	12	10	13	16	13

* as of 1 January 2005).

Source: Author's calculations

Party fragmentation of the 2002-06 Slovak Parliament started already a few months after the election. A group of 11 HZDS deputies split from the party to form a new political party – the People's Union (ĽÚ). Initially they tried to initiate the change in the party leadership, using decreasing levels of support for the party as the main argument. However, the party leader Mečiar managed to stabilize his position, after which the rebels decided to form a new party. Another wave of defections hit the HZDS in 2005. Hence, during the 2002-04 electoral cycle the number of HZDS deputies dropped from 36 to 22.

The SDKÚ also suffered from disintegration. Seven of its MPs left the party and formed the Free Forum (SF). Initially, the SF did not seem to represent a threat to the electoral prospects of the SDKÚ. However, since the breakdown of the ANO, the preferences of the SF virtually match those of the SDKÚ (IVO, 2005). Defections of parliamentarians affected also the Communists, albeit in a much smaller scale. Three parliamentary factions – those of the SMK, KDH and Smer – remained stable over the whole electoral cycle.

Important shifts have taken place in the political scene outside of Parliament too. The most significant was the process of concentration on the left of the political spectrum. In late 2004 the Smer party absorbed three extra-parliamentary social democratic parties

that had previous parliamentary experience[49]. As a consequence, the left of the political spectrum has since then been occupied by Smer and the neo-Communist KSS. On the other side of the spectrum, the fusion of the SDKÚ with a small extra-parliamentary Democratic Party was the only sign of party concentration. This meant that among the small centre-right parties only one – the Democratic Party – merged with the SDKÚ – i.e. there has been only a limited party concentration on the right of the spectrum. The centre-right seems to be ideologically divided and organizationally fragmented: Even though the ANO is probably going through a process of terminal decline, both the SDKÚ and Christian Democrats stand good chances of being returned to Parliament after the 2006 early election, as does the more centrist Free Forum. The viability of the ethnic divide in Slovak politics is documented by a constant level of support for the Party of Hungarian Coalition and also for the radical-nationalist Slovak National Party. The SNS, even though out of Parliament since 2002, has had a stable pool of supporters, and only intra-party personality clashes leading to a split in 2001 led to its absence from Parliament (Konečný – Zetocha, 2005). Should the party be elected to it in 2006, the importance of the ethnic cleavage will further increase. The claim that "the Hungarian card" is no longer a useful tool for electoral mobilization (Szomolányi, 2003: 19-20) may well prove to be premature.

Patterns of party competition and the impact of second-order election

Two second-order election – the European Parliament (EP) election and the regional election held in 2004 and 2005 respectively, are briefly examined in the remaining part of this article. The concept of second-order election refers to election in which the voters do not decide about composition of the national government. Thus, while being an important indicator of how voters evaluate the performance and policies of political parties, the second-order election only decide about the less important political positions. In the second-order election voters often punish the parties in government and also support parties that are politically less significant (e.g. Marsh, 1998).

The historic first election to the European Parliament in June 2004 also saw the lowest turnout ever registered in a nationwide election in Slovakia. Less than 17 per cent of voters per cent took part in the election. A year and a half later the turnout in the (second) regional election reached just above 18 per cent. Due to their character as second-order election and also because of the low turnout, their results do not bear direct consequences for the nationwide party system. However, both election showed trends that may have important implications for the patterns of party competition and strategies of parties in the national election too.

Slovakia was one of a few countries where EP election did not see a victory for the parliamentary opposition. Fourteen seats in the European Parliament allocated to the

---

[49] The Smer party integrated the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), its former breakaway faction called the Social Democratic Alternative, and the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS). It thereafter changed its name to Smer – Social Democracy.

Slovak MEPs were divided among five parties: The SDKÚ and KDH secured three seats, as did the opposition Smer and HZDS. The remaining two seats went to the Hungarian Coalition Party. Three aspects of the EP election seem particularly important. First, unlike all previous parliamentary election, the 2004 EP election actually worked as a stabilising factor for party system development. Even though the Communists and the ANO did not cross the 5 per cent threshold of parliamentary representation, it was the first nationwide election in which no new party succeeded in its bid for parliamentary seats. Hence, the election did not play (in Slovakia rather usual) a disruptive role in party system development. Second, the election confirmed that a great deal of voters who, in opinion polls indicate their support for the Smer party, are less disciplined and more difficult to mobilize in the election than supporters of the SDKÚ, SMK and KDH. This was evident already in the 2002 national election. Smer, even though a top contender for a plurality of votes, came only third, well behind the HZDS and SDKÚ. Third, a *de facto* winner of the 2004 EP election was the KDH. Voicing a mildly Euro-sceptic message and being able to mobilize its core supporters, the Christian Democrats nearly doubled its share of votes compared to the parliamentary election of 2002. The "identity politics" of the KDH based on cultural conservative values clearly paid off, and the well-developed network of local party organizations (Rybář, 2005: 146-149) also played its role in the successful performance of the party. The campaign before the EP election presented an opportunity for parties to further shape the political discourse of the left-right party competition. On the one hand, the Smer party election manifesto was full of positive references to the process of European integration, which was rather surprising in the light of previous unsystematic (and sometimes Euro--sceptic) remarks of the Smer representatives on EU integration (see Malová – Láštic – Rybář, 2005: 106-108). In addition, the party document contained positive references to the European social model and criticised the Slovak Government for its neo-Liberal policies aimed at dismantling the Slovak welfare state. The leftist character of Smer was also reinforced by the fact that several representatives of smaller social democratic parties (that merged with the party later that year) run on the Smer ticket. On the other side of the political spectrum, the ideologically fragmented character of the centre--right was confirmed by the EP election literature of the KDH and SDKÚ. While the KDH based its party manifesto on cultural conservatism and soft Euro-scepticism, the SDKÚ openly supported the integration project and spoke highly of the virtues of the European Single Market. In addition, the ANO suffered from intra-party disputes over who should lead the EP party list, a factor that contributed to the electoral failure of the party. It is important to note, however, that the campaign was largely devoid of any substantial political content. The competing visions of politics only rarely featured in public debates in the campaign. Probably the main issue was a vaguely presented "valence factor": The parties tried to present themselves as more competent than their opponents in "representing Slovakia in the EU". Only rarely they explained, however, were what ideas and policies they would promote once in the European Parliament.

While in the EP election most parties tested their electoral fortunes without alliances, the 2005 regional election represent a good case for examining patterns of party competition and cooperation. Cooperation strategies of parties have been influenced by various factors, including a distinct electoral system[50] and a unique distribution of support for parties in Slovakia's eight self-governing regions (Mesežnikov, 2006: 60). In spite of that, three main patterns of party cooperation can be identified: A cooperation of the centre-right, centre-left and the HZDS. The centre-right parties – typically, but not invariably, including the KDH and SDKÚ – joined forces in six regions. The centre-left alliance composed of Smer and the Free Forum formed in three regions, while Smer also joined forces with the radical nationalist SNS in four regions[51]. The third "cooperation" pattern, or rather a lack of it, confirmed the political isolation of the HZDS. The party entered into coalitions only with marginal nationalist and communist parties who were not able to secure a single seat in the regional assemblies. The ethnic divide was also present in the regional election. With the single exception of the Bratislava region, the SMK did not enter into any electoral alliance. In one case the SMK even faced the united front of all ethnic Slovak parties[52].

The election meant a drastic defeat for the HZDS. The party's total share of seats in the eight regional assemblies amounted to less than 12 per cent. The Christian Democrats became the most successful party, winning over 21 per cent of the seats (Mesežnikov, 2006: 61). The Smer, SDKÚ and the SMK also achieved decent electoral results, gaining between 14 and 17 per cent of all seats. The results of Smer were particularly impressive, compared with their not-so-successful 2001 regional election (see Krivý, 2002). It can be hypothesized that Smer benefited from a merger with the SDĽ, whose strong regional and local party organization helped the party to succeed even in the 2002 local election, shortly after a disastrous performance of the party at the national parliamentary level.

Overall, the two second-order election seem to have two important consequences for the party competition at the national level. First of all, the identity parties, especially the Christian Democrats and the ethnic-Hungarian SMK, benefit most from the low levels of turnout. Both parties are able to mobilize their core electorate and succeed in placing their representatives to various second-order elected offices. In addition, the SDKÚ also manages to run successful campaigns and surpass all expected electoral results. Second, the patterns of cooperation and conflict between political parties since 2002 reflect a growing importance of the left-right divide, and persistence of the ethnic

---

[50] While a list proportional representation system in a single nationwide constituency is used for the EP as well as national parliamentary election, results in the regional election are decided by a multi-member plurality system.

[51] In both situations, however, Smer was a clearly dominant force in the alliance and its partners remained in a junior position.

[52] In the Nitra region, where the SMK won an absolute majority of seats in the regional assembly in 2001, a "Slovak Coalition" formed composed of the SDKÚ, KDH, HZDS, Smer and even the SNS. The instrumental character of the coalition was confirmed by a break up of the coalition two months after the election.

cleavage. The importance of cultural-conservative versus more liberal political stand-points was also confirmed, especially in the EP election.

Conclusion

The main goal of this article was to assess the extent and conditions of a left-right programmatic turn of party competition since the 2002 election in Slovakia. It has been noted that the dominant conflict between authoritarian and pro-democratic forces typical for most of 1990s has considerably weakened. This trend is confirmed by both the analyses of the voters' electoral choices (Krivý, 2005:107) and by the mobilization strategies of the relevant political parties. However, a convergence of party political competition towards a single-dimensional left-right model based on socio-economic differences has not been confirmed. Instead, three dimensions of party-political conflict seem to have formed: a socio-economic left-right divide, a cultural-conservative versus liberal division, and an ethic Slovak-Hungarian cleavage. The potential for cultivation of these divisions exists at the population level, and has been rather successfully exploited by various political parties. Party political organizational development reflected and also reinforced these divisions. In terms of organizational consolidation of political parties, I found mixed results. While parties on the left have undergone a process of concentration, the centre-right has further disintegrated and remains organizationally and electorally fragmented and ideologically divided. The explanation probably rests in the government-opposition dynamics. The centre-right further disintegrated because of disputes over government performance and programme, while the centre-left united to compete effectively against the ruling parties. The ethnic cleavage is politically embodied primarily by the SMK, and manifests itself occasionally in tensions between the party and its centre-right allies. Moreover, the prospect of electoral success of the radical nationalist Slovak National Party in the 2006 parliamentary election may further reinforce the ethnic cleavage in Slovak politics. Finally, the results of the se-cond-order election, even if they are treated with caution due to their specific character, also support the trend of party competition structured along the three divides identified above. A particularly revealing illustration of the changing nature of party competition is the poor results recently achieved by the erstwhile dominant HZDS. The party has been unable to articulate its position in the new structure of party competition and re-mains politically isolated, even though both the centre-left and the centre-right parties indicated their willingness to cooperate with the HZDS after the 2006 election.

References

Berecová, Petra (2003): *Volebné programy a programová blízkosť parlamentných strán po voľbách 2002: Analýza a komparácia volebných programov* (diplomová práca). Katedra politológie, FF UK Bratislava, 2003.

Bilčík, Vladimír (2001): Can Slovakia Catch Up? The Implications of EU Accession Talks a Year After the Helsinki Summit, *Working Paper 2001/1*, Danish Institute of International Affairs.

Bútorová, Zora – Gyárfášová, Oľga (2006): Verejná mienka, in Kollár, Miroslav – Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Bútora, Martin, eds., *Slovensko 2005: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2006, pp. 209-245.

Gyárfášová, Oľga (2003): Volebné správanie, in Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Kollár, Miroslav, eds., *Slovenské voľby '02: Výsledky, dôsledky, súvislosti*. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2003, pp. 107-127.

Gyárfášová, Oľga (2004): Political Parties and Society: Public Perception and Main Trends in Electoral Behavior, in Gyárfášová, Oľga – Mesežnikov, Grigorij, eds., *Party Government in Slovakia: Experience and Perspectives*. Institute for Public Affairs, 2004, pp. 113-126.

Haughton, Tim (2001): HZDS: The Ideology, Organisation and the Support Base of Slovakia's Most Successful Party. *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 5, 2001, pp. 745-769.

Haughton, Tim and Rybář, Marek (2004a): All Right Now? Explaining the Successes and Failures of the Slovak Centre-Right. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2004, pp. 115-132.

Haughton, Tim and Rybář, Marek (2004b): The Communist Party of Slovakia: Electoral Performance, Parliamentary Experience and Policy Choice. *Sociológia – The Slovak Sociological review*, Vol. 36, No. 6, 2004, pp. 545-559.

Inštitút pre verejné otázky (2005): *Slovensko na prahu volebného roku (November 2005)*: available at http://www.ivo.sk/ftp_folder/produkt_4166.pdf (28 February, 2006).

Konečný, Miroslav – Zetocha, Karel (2005): Slovenská národní strana: Druhá šance. *Středoevropské politické studie*, Vol. 7, No. 2-3, 2005: available at http://www.cepsr.cz (28 February 2006).

Kreuzer, Marcus – Pettai, Vello (2003): Patterns of Political Instability: Affiliation Patterns of Politicians and Voters in Post-Communist Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 76-98.

Krivý, Vladimír (2002): Regionálne voľby 2001 – analýza výsledkov, in Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Nižňanský, Viktor, eds., *Reforma verejnej správy na Slovensku: Súvislosti, aktéri, voľby*. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2002, pp. 201-249.

Krivý, Vladimír (2005): Politické orientácie obyvateľov a hlavné deliace línie, in Szomolányi, Soňa, ed., *Spoločnosť a politika na Slovensku: Cesty k stabilite 1989-2004*. Univerzita Komenského, 2005, pp. 84-107.

Láštic, Erik (2004): Parties and Government in Slovakia: A Fatal Attraction? in Gyárfášová, Oľga – Mesežnikov, Grigorij, eds., *Party Government in Slovakia: Experience and Perspectives*. Institute for Public Affairs, 2004, pp. 101-112.

Malová, Darina – Krause, Kevin (2000): Parliamentary Party Groups in Slovakia, in Heidar, Knut – Koole, Ruud, eds., *Parliamentary Party Groups in European Democracies*. Routledge, 2000, pp. 195-213.

Malová, Darina – Láštic, Erik – Rybář, Marek (2005): *Slovensko ako nový členský štát Európskej únie: Výzva z periférie?* Bratislava, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2005.

Malová, Darina (2005): Parlamentná demokracia: Hľadanie rovnováhy medzi inšti-túciami a aktérmi, in Szomolányi, Soňa, ed., *Spoločnosť a politika na Slovensku: Cesty k stabilite*. Univerzita Komenského, 2005, pp. 111-131.

Marsh, Michael (1998): Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Election. British Journal of Political Science, Vol. 28, pp. 591-607.

Mesežnikov, Grigorij (2003): Vnútropolitický vývoj a system politických strán, in Kolár, Miroslav – Mesežnikov, Grigorij, eds., Slovensko 2003: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2003, pp. 19-112.

Rybář, Marek (2004a): Party Politics and Changing Patterns of Party Competition, in Gyárfášová, Oľga – Mesežnikov, Grigorij, eds., *Party Government in Slovakia: Experience and Perspectives*. Institute for Public Affairs, 2004, pp. 25-44.

Rybář, Marek (2004b): Organizácia nových politických strán na Slovensku: Niekoľko úvah o vnútrostraníckom živote SDKÚ, ANO a Smeru, in Rybář, Marek, ed., *Politické strany ako organizácie: Prípady zo Slovenska*. Univerzita Komenského, 2004, pp. 10-31.

Rybář, Marek (2005): Premeny straníckej politiky, in Szomolányi, Soňa, ed., *Spoloč-nosť a politika na Slovensku: Cesty k stabilite 1989-2004*. Univerzita Komenského, 2005, pp. 132-153.

Salner, Andrej (2003): Ekonomika, in Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Kol-lár, Miroslav, eds., *Slovenské voľby '02: Výsledky, dôsledky, súvislosti*. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2003, pp. 225-238.

Shabad, Goldie – Slomczynski, Kazimierz M. (2004): Inter-Party Mobility among Parliamentary Candidates in Post-Communist East Central Europe. *Party Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2004, pp. 151-176.

SME (2006): Vláda Mikuláša Dzurindu sa rozpadá, *Denník Sme* (7 February).

Smer (2005): *Pravicová vláda berie ľuďom ešte aj súdnu ochranu*: available at http://www.strana-smer.sk/tlac_odd/konferencie/clanok.html?id=1408 (28 February, 2006).

Szomolányi, Soňa (2003): Voľby v krajinách V4: čo vypovedajú o stave demokracie v regióne, in Mesežnikov, Grigorij –Gyárfášová, Oľga – Kollár, Miroslav, eds.,

Slovenské voľby '02: Výsledky, dôsledky, súvislosti. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2003, pp. 11-30.

Učeň, Peter – Surotchak, Jan Erik, eds. (2005): *Why We Lost: Explaining the Rise and Fall of the Centre-Right Parties in Central Europe, 1996-2002*. The International Republican Institute, 2005.

Učeň, Peter (2000): Desať rokov vývoja stráníckej politiky a jeho formatívny konflikt, in Pešek, Jan – Szomolányi, Soňa, eds., November 1989 na Slovensku: Súvislosti, predpoklady a dôsledky. Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 2000, pp. 111-133.

Učeň, Peter (2003): Faktory úspechu strán stredového populizmu, in Mesežnikov, Grigorij – Gyárfášová, Oľga – Kollár, Miroslav, eds., *Slovenské voľby '02: Výsledky, dôsledky, súvislosti*. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2003, pp. 47-60.

Marek Rybář *works as lecturer at the Department of Political Science, Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia.*

E-mail: Marek.Rybar@fphil.uniba.sk.