

Immigration issues in Slovak politics

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Abstract: *The paper analyses the issue of immigration in Slovak politics, based on its representation in electoral manifestos and political statements of parties present in the Parliament. In particular, the paper explains the causes of the low impact of the immigration issue in Slovak politics, presents a brief history of Slovak immigration, portrays the attitude of the Slovak majority population toward immigrants, and offers possible future development of the issue.*

Keywords: *politics, attitude, electoral manifest, political statement, absence, future development*

Introduction

The newest results of presidential elections in France have confirmed the trend of an increasing impact of immigration issues in the political struggle, as before the 2nd round, campaigning candidates competed in declarations about stopping immigration in an attempt to win over Marie Le-Pen's voters. There are virtually no more countries left in Western Europe where immigration and the issue of stopping further inflows of migrants would not be a decisive topic in the election race. There is also a strong increase in the support for anti-immigration, populist, and even far-

right-wing parties in the region. This paper strives to analyze the issue of migration in the conditions of the Slovak Republic.

In spite of over two decades of open borders, the Slovak Republic remains one of three EU member states with the lowest share of immigrants on the total population (Eurostat, 2009). On the other hand, it would be incorrect to claim that immigration into the CSSR (Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) was nonexistent before 1989, although migration flows were then declared to be temporary, serving the sole purpose of study and internships for the inhabitants of the so-called “friendly countries” based on international agreements. The territory of today’s Slovakia has experienced various migration flows for centuries, which have in the end turned the Slovak society into one of the most heterogeneous communities on the current European continent. The societal make-up and its changes are sensitively perceived by the population, which expresses their attitude towards immigration policy and its effects by supporting individual political parties. Given the increase in importance of this issue in virtually all EU member states, we consider it to be interesting as well as important to explore the status of this issue in Slovakia. Does the number of foreigners reflect the significance of this issue in politics? Do Slovak politicians actually discuss this topic? Are the citizens of the Slovak Republic interested in immigration and the situation in the area of foreigner integration?

Theoretical basis

Politics is perceived to be closely connected to the issue of immigration. On one hand it is the political institutions and/or their representatives acting on behalf of political parties, who determine and shape immigration policies and manage the integration of foreigners.¹ At the same time, one can appreciate a correlation between the number of foreigners in a given country and the importance of the issue in political discussion. The higher the number of immigrants or citizens with immigration background, the greater the importance of the immigration issue in politics, often becoming the decisive issue of election campaigning. Since World War Two, and especially since the 1950’s, Europe (and particularly its western states) has been experiencing unparalleled immigration flows, which have been changing not only their labor and economy sectors, but also the traditional “western” and Christian² fundamentals of their societies. The original ideas about the economic utilization of migrants, who would, after having worked in Europe for several years, return back to their home countries — as proposed in Germany — or merging and “melting” the immigrants’ culture — as expected by the French — have not been fulfilled. Examples of unsuccessful scenarios can be found in several countries. Growing groups

of migrants have been becoming more and more visible, especially the ones coming from culturally heterogeneous countries. Their increased concentration, connected above all with economic problems, causes dissatisfaction on the part of the majority population, which starts using traditional accusations of immigrants' taking their jobs, decreasing salaries, increasing unemployment and abusing the social system. When the phobia of the Muslim culture is added to the concoction, immigration becomes the main political issue of election campaigns. Anti-immigration political parties have, in the past years, gained such power that they are becoming an important political player and often gain the position of a coalition member (Italy), or its quiet supporter (Netherlands). The latest results of the first round of presidential elections in France confirm the 3rd place of the Front National's candidate, but a record-breaking number of cast votes and the subsequent fight to win-over her voters show that immigration takes a leading position on the scale of importance of election topics. Voters express their opinion and attitude towards immigration and the unsuccessful integration of immigrants through elections. Politicians, striving to win as many votes as possible, cannot afford to ignore immigration and will naturally take the position of the majority of their dissatisfied constituent population. Immigration groups do not constitute an interesting group of voters, when one considers the portion of such populations, which have been naturalized and subsequently have the right to vote, further decreasing their impact. In this case a realistic option could be a political party represented by the leaders of a given political group; a different type of a political party would face the threat of a low rate of identification and "believability" of their being represented by a member of the domestic majority.

The Slovak Republic and immigration

As we have mentioned above, statistically the Slovak Republic has only had a short and modest experience with immigration, either after 1989, or before this time. However, ethnically the Slovak society belongs to highly heterogeneous ones, a fact confirmed by the latest census, where the majority is constituted by citizens of Slovak nationality is followed by citizens of Hungarian, Roma, Ukrainian, Czech and Ruthenian descent (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2012). The composition of the Slovak population reflects migratory movements into the territory of the present-day Slovakia in the last centuries, the original population being enriched by inflows of Jewish groups, Turks, Tatars, Croats, Serbs and Poles (Čaplovič et al., 2000). The Slovak society is therefore based on a colorful immigration history, whereas emigration waves from Slovakia have been much stronger. This could lead to an assumption that the strong migratory history of Slovakia would be reflected in a more tolerant attitude of the Slovak population towards immigrants. However, paradoxically the

citizens of the Slovak Republic have been found to be the least tolerant towards immigrants in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2006). In addition to international representative surveys, this attitude has been confirmed by several nation-wide opinion polls (Vašečka, 2009). Where does this negative and reserved attitude of Slovak citizens come from? Why do they fail to perceive the contribution of immigrants to their society and would prefer not to have foreigners as neighbors? This situation cannot be explained by a high number of foreigners in Slovakia, which in 2011 only constituted 1.15 % of the country's population (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2012). Therefore citizens of Slovakia cannot base their negative impression of migrants on personal contact. In this case, the characteristic features of the Slovak society are clearly visible — traditionally described as a conservative, Christian society, where immigrants could be seen a threat to its own integrity. The fear of the unknown can certainly play a role — immigrants are perceived as members of a different culture, who disturb the majoritarian society. This argument is, however, also easily falsifiable, since the majority of migrants come from the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Romania, and even immigrants from Vietnam and China have integrated very well into the society. Other major prejudiced ideas concerning immigrants include high crime rates, abuses of the social system or transmission of diseases — however, none of these statements is supported by statistics. It is therefore evident that Slovak citizens' attitude towards foreigners is caused by a combination of fear of the unknown, reinforced by the closed borders and low immigration rates during the socialist era, prevalence of rural population and most of all the current economic situation, where unemployment has become a long-term problem, reaching 14 % in 2011 (Eurostat, 2012). The main motives for immigration to Slovakia remain economic, in other words, immigration for the purposes of finding work. This is the cause for the inhabitants' image of immigrants as individuals who take jobs from the domestic population. This reasoning becomes stronger with an increasing unemployment rate. In such times, as opposed to the years of economic growth, it is more difficult to argue that the inflow of immigrants is necessary for economic purposes. In the case of Slovakia, however, such immigration remains necessary, since the profile of the unemployed population does not match the requirements of the labor market. In addition to a reserved or negative attitude of the society, another factor, which causes the issue of immigration to be unattractive in political discussions, is the importance of the issue as perceived by the citizens of the Slovak Republic. These two reasons cause the topic to be underrepresented in election campaigns, as shown in the following section, analyzing election programs of individual political parties.

Analysis of the issue of migration in Slovak politics

In spite of a common past with the Czech Republic and a similar development of both countries following their separation, there are differences between the states in their political handling of the issue of immigration. Based on a 5-fold higher ratio of foreigners to the general population when compared to Slovakia, immigration issues are better represented and researched in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, the issue is handled by Štefančík (Štefančík, 2007), investigating the questions of migration in political parties' election programs during the 2002 and 2006 elections. In this paper, we have decided to focus on the period of the 2010 parliamentary elections, the shortened term of office of the government caused by government's fall, as well as the parliamentary elections of 2012.

As far as the methodology is concerned, the researched sample included primary documents in the form of election programs of 6 selected political parties, which gained over 5 % of ballots in the 2010 parliamentary elections, securing their entry into the parliament. Based on the early parliamentary elections of 2012 and their results, the issue of immigration in the 2012 early elections was also included in the study. The analysis included an identical sample of political parties, comparing whether changes have been made in the treatment of immigration issues in their election programs. Statements of representatives of selected political parties concerning immigration have also been noted.

Issue of immigration in Slovak politics

Traditionally Slovak parliamentary elections see a large number of participating political parties. Slovakia has a proportional voting system, allowing any political party to run after collecting 15 thousand signatures and a subsequent registration. In 2012, the number of running parties hit a record of 26; however, in the present analysis we have decided to only select relevant political parties, i.e. parties, which have been included in the parliament in the 2010–2012 period and continue to be represented there. The Slovak political arena is undergoing a gradual crystallization and is experiencing a decrease in the number of political parties on both ends of the political spectrum. Although it is possible to speculate about the traditional classification of these parties based on their activities, the only current leftist political party is SMER-SD; other political parties are included in the center-right end of the spectrum. SMER-SD as a social-democratic party should act as an advocate of minority rights, and/or include immigration issues in its agenda. When analyzing their 2010 election program, the only reference to migration appears in the document's introduction when enumerating the main challenges of the international commu-

nity and our obligations as members of the EU and NATO, where migration is connected to unfavorable demographic development. (SMER-SD, 2010). SMER-SD did not prepare an election program for the 2012 parliamentary elections, making it impossible to compare any possible changes in its position. SMER-SD, as the sole governing party, will remain the main architect of migration policy in the future, as it controls all the government positions competent in the area of migration policy and nominates members of institutions dealing with migration. It is not expected that SMER-SD should present immigration issues to a larger extent or change any significant parts of the current immigration policy. This is due to the fact that a large portion of its voter base is constituted by former voters of SNS and HZDS-ĽS, which were characterized by their pro-Slovak stance. The reasons for the absence of this issue in Slovak political parties' discussion are mentioned below. At the same time, as a part of the country's foreign policy, SMER-SD will contribute to the discussion concerning the EU's Migration Policy.

SNS (Slovak National Party) is another political party analyzed herein, despite the fact that it failed to attract 5 % of votes in the 2012 parliamentary elections, excluding it from the Parliament. However, in the 2010–2012 period it belonged to the parties represented in the Parliament. The classification of this party within the political spectrum is quite challenging, as it advocates elements of both left- and right-wing policies. The traditional agenda of the Slovak National Party includes all the foreign elements in the society, the main topics being relations with Hungary, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, and in particular the Roma issue. None of their election programs mention any reference to the immigration issue and in spite of their traditional protection of the needs of the Slovak nation; this party does not consider immigration to be a major issue (SNS, 2012).

On the right (or center-right) end of the spectrum, immigrant issues are addressed by MOST-HÍD. Among others, the party advocating Slovak-Hungarian understanding positions itself as a champion of minority rights, which constitutes one of the pillars of their policy. Therefore, their program builds upon minority protection, using legislative measures and financing (MOST-HID, 2012). At the same time it is important to note that this only covers national minorities, which might include immigrants from the Czech Republic, Ukraine and/or Russia. National minorities in Slovakia are determined based on censuses, the last of which took place in 2011. Based on its agenda, MOST-HÍD constitutes the political party with the highest interest in national minority issues, although the issue of immigration as such is absent from its program, probably due to low immigration figures in the country.

The name of SDKÚ-DS's election program "Creating More Jobs in Slovakia" suggests that the party based its election agenda on the economic dimension. Upon a more thorough analysis it becomes clear that the party fails to mention immigration issues or foreign workers participating in the labor market in any of the election

program chapters. Immigration issues are not only not mentioned in the economic section of the election program, but also fail to appear in the culture and education subsections (SDKÚ-DS, 2012). Public appearances of SDKÚ-DS's representatives do not provide any further information on their position towards immigration, the only exception being the former finance minister, Ivan Mikloš, who asserted that "the country should have a well-considered migration policy and strategy, to be able to attract mainly highly-qualified labor force."³ This being said, the 2010 election program of SDKÚ-DS contained no references to immigration, solutions of this issue on the labor market, or the integration of immigrants.

The liberal parties in Slovakia are represented by SAS (Freedom and Solidarity). Although the party advocates traditional liberal issues, such as decriminalization of marijuana and equal rights for homosexuals, neither its 2010 nor 2012 election programs ever specifically mention immigrants, migration policy or their integration. SAS positions itself as concentrating predominantly on economic issues (SaS, 2010; 2012).

Although the position of the *Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti* (Common People and Independent Personalities) movement as a traditional political party is contentious, we are including an analysis of their election program due to the party's election results. Its election program does not include any references to immigration or multiculturalism policies, and due to the heterogeneous composition of the party's membership base, it is impossible to predict, which positions the party's representatives might take (OLaNO, 2012). However, based on the conservative leaning of the party's main leaders, a conservative approach to immigration can be assumed, together with a preference for an assimilationist societal structure.

Out of the analyzed parties, the issues of immigration and multiculturalism were the most heavily discussed by the representatives of the KDĽ conservative party. Their reserved attitude and preference for an assimilationist approach is demonstrated by a quotation from their election program: "As regards migration, based on negative experience in several Member States, we shall demand an adequate language and cultural integration of migrants." (KDĽ, 2012) In addition to the above, the vice-chairman of KDĽ commented on the issue from his position as the Minister of the Interior in charge of immigration issues. According to him: "multiculturalism has failed... Migration must be conditional upon full integration and acceptance of the Slovak culture and traditions." "We welcome legal migrants, but will not accept any attempted changes to our customs, values, or traditions, and expect them to respect that," he stressed, adding that he perceived migrants as guests.⁴

"They must behave like guests," going on to add that "if they do not accept their host's values, they have to leave and go elsewhere." At the same time he condemned the creation of immigrant communities and proposed recruiting highly-skilled foreign labor force using information centers in selected countries. One can therefore

perceive KDH as a political party, which dedicates the most attention to immigration issues and presents its ideas via political statements.

The attitudes of individual political parties are ultimately reflected in several defining documents forming the Slovak migration and integration policy. These include the Government's policy statement, giving rise to major documents such as the Migration Policy Vision and the Concept of Foreigner Integration. These, however, fall within the scope of the individual ministries and no deeper political discussion has taken place addressing the issues.

Immigration issues on the local level

We do not expect there to be an increase in importance and attention given to immigration issues by political parties in the future parliamentary elections. However, the situation can be different on the local level. The Slovak Republic is administratively divided into 8 self-governing regions, but particularly on the local level of municipalities, the issue can overtake the national discussion. First of all, migrants settle in cities. Since the majority of migrants come to Slovakia because of favorable labor conditions, they head for the economically strongest regions, which include Bratislava and Trnava. The reasons for this include a heightened concentration of foreign investment, as well as factory jobs. Furthermore, Bratislava as the capital and the largest city with economic, educational and cultural opportunities constitutes the most attractive immigrant destination. Due to the diversity of immigrant groups, no immigrant colonies have so far been created in Bratislava, with a notable exception of parts of Bratislava with a higher concentration of the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. In spite of an absence of an immigration and integration policy, no problems in the coexistence of the majority population and the communities have so far been observed on this level.

Reasons for the absence of immigration issues in Slovak politics

Main reasons for a low representation of the issue in the Slovak political scene include the importance of other topics for the population and a low number of foreigners in Slovakia. Traditional political issues include economic problems — decreasing unemployment, social issues, the fight against corruption and justice — while cultural and societal issues (with a notable exception of the Roma issue and the so-called Hungarian issue⁵) do not influence voter preferences. Therefore, relevant political parties have no reason to address issues, which are not interesting for voters. In addition to that, the low number of foreigners in Slovakia does not cause prob-

lems in the Slovak society. Immigrants do not expressively enforce their cultural and religious demands, mainly due to their cultural and religious proximity to Slovakia. This is due to the fact that the majority of foreigners come from the EU, and the remainder is predominantly made up of groups such as the Vietnamese, the Chinese and the Romanians.

Migration policy and future Slovakia

In the following years, no increase in the importance of immigration issues is expected to occur in Slovak politics. Given the current domestic and international issues, the issue of immigration and integration will remain marginal, and changes are not expected before significant improvements of unemployment figures and renewed recruitment of foreign workers for Slovak companies have taken place. The positives include two key documents defining Slovak attitude towards immigration for the forthcoming period — The Concept of Foreigner Integration approved in 2009 (*Koncepcia integrácie cudzincov, 2009*) and the 2020 Migration Policy Vision (*Migračná politika SR s výhľadom do roku 2020, 2011*) approved by Iveta Radičová's government in 2010. Both documents represent first key acts determining the Slovak approach to immigration, recognizing that Slovakia will gradually become dependent on the arrival of an additional foreign labor force. According to the document, the Slovak Republic should be interested in high-quality skilled labor force — adding that emphasis should be put on workers from “culturally proximate countries” (*Migračná politika SR s výhľadom do roku 2020, 2011*). Since the document was prepared during Robert Fico's government and approved during the term of the right-wing government led by Iveta Radičová, it can be assumed that the entire political spectrum will identify with its conclusions regarding migration policy. In general, the main portion of immigration to Slovakia comes from EU countries, and is perceived as trouble-free (due to the free movement of workers it is also hard to limit), therefore it is implied that immigration will be the most welcome from Ukraine and the Balkan countries, excluding immigrants of Muslim faith. Therefore we expect little attention to be paid to the issue of migration and the delegation of migration issues to the European level within the EU Migration Policy.

In addition to the above, based on prognoses it is possible to expect migration flows to remain unchanged until 2015, i.e. they will originate mainly in EU countries. Changes can occur after 2015, however the situation will be principally determined by the economic situation of Slovakia (*Mihály-Divínsky, 2011*).

Finally, the Slovak Republic is trying to solve other policy issues, especially economic ones. However, sooner or later, given a constant decline in natality, population ageing, and a lack of workers in certain sectors, the Slovak economy will become

dependent on foreign labor force. It will be interesting to observe, if any of the parties choose to support and advocate immigration.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, it is not an easy task to analyze the issue of immigration in Slovak politics — it can be established that with the exception of isolated statements of some politicians and short references in election programs of some political parties, this issue is virtually absent. The main factors include a combination of voters' disinterest in the topic, combined with a low number of foreigners in Slovakia, whose presence does not cause any significant problems, and therefore elicits no reactions by the Slovak political representatives or negative feelings in the population. In the upcoming years, shifts in the issue are not expected to reach the levels of Western European countries. However, the Slovak Republic should use its current low immigration rates to prepare itself and its citizens for the necessary future arrival of further immigrants, ensuring their integration, which would be beneficial for the entire society.

Notes

- ¹ The impulse for the creation and composition of the integration policy does not have to come from the state itself. On the contrary, we perceive the main actors in this process to include the third sector – non-governmental organizations, organizations representing immigrants, the academic community, and human rights organizations. The government is limited to contributing and/or concluding the discussion by approving an integration policy and providing the financial means for its execution.
- ² More and more often, the term “Christian traditions” is superseded by “Judeo-Christian values”.
- ³ Cited from: HNClub (2011) Radičovej prvý balík problémy Slovákov neuhasí. Available at: <http://integruj.sk/page.php?a=21> (Accessed on 23 May 2012).
- ⁴ Cited from: SME (2011) Podľa Lipšica multikulturalizmus zlyhal. Available at: <http://www.sme.sk/c/6036602/podla-lipsica-multikulturalizmus-zlyhal.html> (Accessed on 20 May 2012).
- ⁵ Although even this topic lost its prominence in the 2012 parliamentary elections, especially when compared to the 2010 parliamentary and the 2009 presidential elections.

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