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## **Framing the War in Ukraine in Slovak Populist Discourse**

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# Universiteit Leiden

## The Netherlands

### **Framing the War in Ukraine in Slovak Populist Discourse**

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MA International Relations

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the way Slovak populist politicians frame the first year of the war in Ukraine, February 2022 to February 2023, and ties this frame to their foreign policy views. Populism is defined as a political strategy to gain power, void of ideological grounding. Studying framing is essential, because people's opinions and voting behavior can be influenced by politicians' narratives. Social media posts of four Slovak populists, Ľuboš Blaha, Robert Fico, Milan Mazurek, and Milan Uhrík are analyzed to see how they frame the problems, causes, moral judgments, and remedies to the war. The analysis finds that the frame has anti-Western and pro-Russian tendencies, with a strong emphasis on national interests. Considering that Slovakia records higher than average levels of these sentiments, this narrative is aimed at the domestic audience. The populist framing propagates a narrative that aligns with their foreign policy goals. This thesis shows an example of how Slovak populism works as a strategic tool without ideological backing and offers suggestions for future research.

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## Introduction

Even though almost 20 years have passed since the Eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU), there are still differences between the so-called Old and New Europe. The countries of New Europe struggle to adopt all pillars of a liberal democratic society and to fully ideologically align with the rest of the EU. This is apparent in issues such as multiculturalism, LGBT rights, tolerance of corruption and respect of the rule of law, pro-Russian attitudes etc. With growing concerns about EU's internal cohesion in light of challenges such as migration, information warfare, and the war in Ukraine, it is important to focus on EU countries that harbor ideas contrary to EU's principles. Considering the growing success of populist, especially far-right, parties in the EU, it is apparent that people are not happy with how the EU has been handling issues in recent years. In order to prevent even more internal fragmentation and possibly more states leaving the EU, these narratives need to be analyzed and understood so that they be addressed. This research directly contributes to the body of literature focusing on populism in Europe, illuminating the framing of one of the most salient issues of recent years.

In this aspect, Slovakia is a particularly interesting case study. As one of the countries of New Europe, Slovakia has failed to internalize Western liberal democratic principles. We observe an intriguing dichotomy. Out of the Visegrád Four (V4) countries, Slovakia is the only one to have adopted the euro, and did so as early as 2009. All governments Slovakia has had since the early 2000s have been supportive of EU integration, and Slovakia's membership in the Western institutions has never been

officially questioned. At the same time, however, a large part of the population holds pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments and the citizens seem to be undecided on their geopolitical allegiance. This is a noteworthy combination of push and pull factors, where the country wants to be closely integrated within the EU, but, at the same time, ideologically align with a different set of values than those represented by the West.

This research explores how Slovak populist politicians frame the war in Ukraine, and how this framing ties to their foreign policy goals. Choosing this topic is especially interesting, because the conflict forces Slovakia to choose sides, as it is unable to simultaneously support Ukraine by actions, such as supplying weapons, but excuse Russia in words. This study provides a stepping stone into longer-term analyses of Slovakia, which can help us understand not only the country's internal dichotomy, but also lessons about ideological integration of New Europe in the EU as well as the appeals of Russia. It takes an original approach by defining populism as a tool of political strategy, devoid of ideological roots. It also shows that opinions on the war in Ukraine within the EU vary, which cannot be ignored.

This thesis is structured as follows. The literature review defines populism as a political strategy and gives an introduction to the situation in Slovakia. Besides Slovak populism, also the roots of Slovak pro-Russian attitudes are explained. The chapter concludes with an overview of foreign policy goals of the analyzed subjects. The methodology describes the method of data collection and analysis and explains the functions of framing. The analysis is divided into four chapters, each focusing on a certain function of the frame - defining the problem, identifying causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies. The outcomes of this analysis are then

connected to the foreign policy views and evidence is presented that confirms that populism in Slovakia is being used as a strategic discourse tool to gain political power. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis and offers recommendations for future studies.

### **Literature review**

Before exploring the populist framing of the war in Ukraine, it is important to define the concept of populism as well as offer a brief introduction to the state of affairs in Slovakia. Besides defining populism and explaining why the political strategy approach is the best lens through which to analyze this case, this chapter offers an introduction of how populism in Slovakia works. Moreover, the historical and ideological grounding of pro-Russian sentiment are explained. The origins of these attitudes are crucial to understanding why Slovakia shows more pro-Russian attitudes than its neighboring countries, and to why populists can easily capitalize on these views to gain support.

#### **Populism as a political strategy**

Albeit populism is a word with great saliency, there is no one commonly accepted definition of it, and there are several approaches to its study. Perhaps the most widely cited one is the ideational approach as presented by Cas Mudde (de la Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019). Mudde defines populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an



expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p.6).” There are various problems with this definition. Firstly, this definition is rather minimal and predominantly used to define populist movements in Western Europe. Still, populism can present itself differently in other areas of the world that would not be encompassed by this definition (de la Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019). Secondly, it is also based on an assumption that populists represent authentic ideas that they pursue. Politicians, however, are dependent on popular support. They need to make themselves attractive to the electorate in order to amass votes. In order to achieve that, they can resort to manipulating the public opinion. The role of a populist leader is to “make politics personal and immediate instead of being remote and bureaucratic (Canovan, 1999, p.14).” In other words, politicians are driven by their desire to succeed, and not merely by an ideology (Barr, 2018). Lastly, this approach puts too much emphasis on a bottom-top approach, where policies are driven by people’s will. Weyland (2021) argues that populism works precisely the other way around. People are too heterogeneous and separated to execute their ideas directly. Thus, they need to delegate their agency to a leader, who then, however, can do as they see fit, without too many serious repercussions. In other words, in populism, the leader is more important than the people, because it is the leader who ultimately exercises agency.

Due to these issues with Mudde’s ideational approach, this thesis defines populism through the lens of political strategy. According to Barr, populism is goal-oriented behavior - “a means of building and/or maintaining political power based on the mass mobilization of supporters through the use of antiestablishment appeals

and plebiscitarian linkages (2017, p.44).” Kurt Weyland, another supporter of the political strategy approach, stresses the role of the populist leader, who must be bold and personalistic in order to be able to mobilize supporters (2017). In other words, the main idea here is that populism is “a mechanism for mobilizing support (Barr, 2018, p.47).” Mobilization is important in order to gain popular support and most importantly - agency. Contrary to Mudde’s view, political strategy is based on the notion that ideas are not enough, because one needs agency to be able to exercise them, which makes agency the crucial component every politician needs. Mobilization often revolves around anti-establishment ideas and tends to appeal to the common sense of the ordinary person. (Hellström, 2013; Barr, 2017; Weyland, 2017; Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2021). Looking at populism this way is especially relevant in this research, as it focuses on framing - selling a certain vision of reality to the electorate in order to gain support. Another benefit of this approach is that it fits well with the Slovak political scene. As will be elaborated on in the following sections, Slovakia’s populists do not follow a single ideological storyline. On the contrary, they change their rhetoric based on the current moods of society and change positions on affairs for the purpose of always maximizing popular support.

### **Populism in Slovakia**

Slovakia is an interesting case study due to its decades-long history of various kinds of populist appeals (Carpenter, 1997; Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009; Mihálik, 2017; Antal, 2023) as well as the fact that the politicians selected for this study represent strategies of both right- and left-wing arguments to gain support. Left-wing (LW) populism is a less salient and researched topic than its right-wing (RW)

counterpart (Otjes and Louwse, 2013). While RW populism mainly focuses on exclusionary policies that are meant to protect the native core of a nation, LW populism tends to concern itself with economic policies (Vasilopoulos and Jost, 2020). At the same time, however, both RW and LW often share a negative view on globalization and supranational bodies, such as the EU. They typically demonstrate pro-Russian and anti-American stances (Podobník et al; 2019). In Slovakia, both LW and RW inspired strategies resort to mobilizing fear in order to gain popular support (Szomolányi and Gál, 2016). While Smer-SD (hereafter “Smer”), the party of Ľuboš Blaha and Robert Fico, generally supports Slovakia’s integration in the EU, the party is typically labelled as a LW populist, or national-populist, because of using populist promises as a strategy to attract votes. Besides fearmongering, Smer frequently promises leftist solutions to problems, such as introducing free train travel for students, or free school lunches for children. These moves tend to be labelled as populist by others, because they divert attention away from Slovakia’s structural problems (Walter, 2017; Frič and Gyarfášová, 2019; Antal, 2023).

As already mentioned, Slovakia has a long history of populist rhetoric. The latest surge, however, came around the migration crisis of 2015, which manifested itself in the 2016 elections. Smer won the elections while ĽSNS and Boris Kollár’s populist movement, Sme Rodina, got enough votes to enter the parliament. These parties based their campaign on framing Middle-Eastern migrants and Islam as an existential threat for Slovakia and vowed to protect the country and its citizens (Szomolányi and Gál, 2016; Bustikova, 2018). ĽSNS is known for their far-right and racist rhetoric and ties to Nazism. In 2021, a number of high ranked members, including Milan Uhrík and Milan

Mazurek, left ĽSNS due to internal quarrels in 2021 and created the Republika movement. In the 2020 elections, held just days before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, these topics were less salient. Smer no longer topped the leaderboard due to the party's alleged connection to the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. Kuciak's work threatened to expose the linkages of politicians, businessmen, mafia, and state organs. While Smer had lost some support compared to previous elections, the party still placed second. Similarly, ĽSNS also entered the parliament with roughly the same level of support as in 2016. The elections were won by the OĽANO movement, led by Igor Matovič, who formed a coalition without Russian supporters, placing Smer and ĽSNS in opposition (Haughton et al., 2021). This government condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, blaming Russia for the conflict, and agreed to help Ukraine as much as possible. This sets a particularly interesting scene for this study, because populist politicians tend to thrive in opposition, where they can more easily mobilize support on the basis of resentment of the government currently in power (Weyland, 2017). Populists had to come up with narratives of the war that would clash with the mainstream view propagated by the government lead by OĽANO.

### **Historical roots and ideological grounding of pro-Russian sentiment in Slovakia**

In the approach towards Russia and Ukraine, Slovakia is a unique case in the region, having different attitudes than other countries of the V4. Slovak citizens have consistently been expressing more support towards Russia than their neighbors (Dębiec, 2022). This is deeply rooted in history – the idea of Slovak nationalism is presented as closely connected to Russia. The idea of Slavic unity, connecting Russia

and Slovakia, among other states, was historically tied to the era of Slovak national movement of the 19th century and the persona of Ľudovít Štúr, who propagated it. Štúr codified the Slovak language in 1843 and is one of the most prominent and well-known names in Slovak history. His rhetoric arose in the context of Magyarization of the Slovak people in what then was Upper Hungary. He advocated for Russia to be the leader of this Pan-Slavic union. At that time, Slovakia's national identity was only developing, and the movement needed a greater nation, Russia, to possibly lead a union of peoples that the Slovaks would also belong to (Baer, 2003; Siamionava, 2015; van Duin, 2016; Diec, 2020; Dębiec, 2022). As a result, the idea of Russia in Slovakia is more connected to Slavic unity, while Russia's past imperialist behavior is often overlooked. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the CEE politicians returned to the messages of the 19th century revivalists to legitimize their rule (Duleba, 2015).

Since this historical period is important both in elementary and high school curricula of Slovak language and history, many lessons are dedicated to it. The persona of Štúr and his followers are directly connected to the idea of Pan-Slavic unity, so these classes can boost national awareness and pro-Russian sympathies at once. The idea of uniting Slavs under the leadership of Russia is, as per the author's first-hand experience with the Slovak education system, presented with a degree of mysticism. Zavorský agrees that this is indeed the case and goes as far as to claim that "this knowledge is among those few things that ordinary Slovak people remember from their literature and history lessons in their later life" (2023, p. 358). The way history and Slovak language and literature are taught in schools can therefore serve as an inconspicuous way of cultivating pro-Russian sentiment in impressionable youngsters. Nonetheless, these

pro-Russian tendencies seem to be less prominent among Slovak university students. They framed Russia based on current sociopolitical events, and while there were mentions of a certain degree of superpower nostalgia, they do not romanticize Russia. On the contrary, students were critical of Russia's actions during the 2014 revolution in Ukraine, and recognized the lack of personal freedom there is in Russia (Siamionava, 2015).

Slovakia has been looking towards Russia also in the 20th century. The country spent close to 70 years as part of Czechoslovakia, however, there were sentiments that the state was favoring the Czechs. Therefore, the Slovaks felt as if they had not had their own state until the ultimate dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 (Siamionava, 2015). Although the Czechs arguably lost their pro-Russian sentiments around the Prague Spring of 1968, the Slovaks still clung on to the idea of getting closer to Russia. The nationalists advocated for Russia to play a bigger role in the region and balance out the other powers, such as Germany. In contrast with other countries of the CEE region and the Baltic States, in the eyes of the Slovaks there were very few negative encounters with Russia. One crucial implication arises – Slovaks also tend to see the Ukrainians through the Russian lens. Most importantly, they perceived the Ukrainian partisans fighting for Ukraine's independence in the middle of the 20th century as insurgents, not as freedom fighters. Similarly, it took a long time for the general public to internalize the existence of post-Soviet republics and to stop labelling these countries as "Russia". This is a complete opposite to, for example, the Polish view, which has historically been anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian (Duleba, 2015, Siamionava, 2015).

Besides the pro-Russian memory construction, the appeal of modern Russia is also ideological. Some Slovaks saw Putin's pre-war regime as one categorically opposed to Western liberalism. They see Russia as a protector of traditional family values and are distrustful of Western ideas (Dębiec, 2022). Studies have shown that among the V4, Slovakia is the only country where the majority of respondents stated that they trust Russia and do not trust the United States. In all other V4 countries, these results were reversed (Mesežnikov and Gyarfášová, 2015). According to Globsec, Slovakia is also the most conspiracy-prone country of Central Europe. It is said to be the only country where the majority of respondents believe that world events are staged by secret groups with a hidden agenda (Klingová, 2019). Moreover, these conspiracies are based on the us vs. them rhetoric combined with moral judgements, a fertile ground for populist discourse. They are usually based on a divide between West and East, where the West, usually the US, has a hidden agenda to harm Slovakia. Russia is then seen as a protector from Western decadence. These beliefs are disseminated through increasingly popular alternative media. Some personas behind these media have been proven to be personally connected to Russian politicians (Panczová, 2017). It becomes apparent that pro-Russian attitudes and anti-establishment rhetoric are directly connected, and that the latter is at times funded by Russia. In summary, there is a degree of pro-Russian ideological priming present in the Slovak school system. This historical interpretation of Russia as Slovakia's protector carries over into the present era. As Russia is known and proven to fund the so called alternative media in Slovakia, it is not surprising that pro-Russian views and conspiracies go hand in hand. Due to a fairly large support of Russia among Slovaks, the highest in the CEE region, there is

potential for populists to mobilize large numbers of voters with these views. These voters also tend to not trust the West, and they hold general anti-establishment views. This is an area that is easily exploitable, as populists can easily adjust their strategy to appeal to this group of voters, who are unlikely to vote for the pro-EU parties. Framing the war in Ukraine differently than mainstream politics is an easy way of attracting this part of the electorate. As Slovakia directly borders Ukraine, the topic of war among the general population was highly salient.

### **Foreign policy goals of Slovak populists**

Slovakia's foreign policy (FP) often serves as a tool of the currently ruling government. It is said to have a weak ideological grounding and little long-term strategy. In practice, politicians tend to use statements as a way of attracting votes of the electorate, not as an expression of their true conviction. Therefore, their opinions and allegiances may vary over the years (de la Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019; Harris, 2019; Mravcová and Havlík, 2021; Marušiak, 2023). This confirms that Slovakia's populism should be examined through the lens of the political strategy approach, as ideological grounding of politics is rather weak. Nonetheless, it is still possible to construct a narrative of what these parties are claiming to hope to accomplish in terms of FP, for example by analyzing their election programs. Smer's 2020 election program is no longer available, and Republika did not exist in 2020, therefore the election programs from the 2023 (snap) elections will be considered.

Smer titles their FP document "The return of sovereignty to Slovakia's foreign policy" (Smer Party, 2023). The party claims that the government elected in 2020 neglected Slovakia's national interests and that it is time to overturn this. While Smer



states that EU membership is invaluable for Slovakia, it expresses discontent with how the EU is currently being run. This is in line with de Zwaan's argument, that the EU suffers from a lack of transparency and declining support of citizens, who often do not understand what the EU bodies actually do (2017). Regarding Ukraine, Smer only promises humanitarian support and advocates for banning weapon exports. The document directly compares the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the American invasion of Iraq, or the NATO bombardment of Kosovo, and sees them all as acts breaching international law. Smer also openly advocates for restoring relationships between the EU, Slovakia, and Russia as soon as the conflict ends. In terms of sanctions, Smer only vows to support sanctions that have an actual impact, implying that the current ones are not efficient. When it comes to international cooperation, Smer wants to work with partners on all sides of the world, Russia included, and refuses to limit the idea of cooperation only to partners in the West. Special significance is placed on cooperation within the V4 (Smer Party, 2023). It can therefore be concluded, that Smer stresses the national interests of Slovakia. As Russia was an important economic partner and gas supplier, Smer advocates for restoring relations as soon as possible for Slovakia's benefit. The lack of ideological grounding in the Western structures is also apparent, as the party refuses liberal democracy as the only correct political system, and openly criticizes the US for their military actions in the past.

Republika similarly advocates for national interests and emphasizes "values and traditions" (Republika Movement, n.d.). Even though the movement recognizes the importance of European cooperation, it disagrees with the direction the EU is currently heading, and calls for the EU to be reduced to merely a form of economic cooperation

of sovereign states. Should the reform not be successful, Republika claims to be ready to initiate a referendum to leave the EU. They call the present-day EU “a European prison of nations under the dictate of Brussels and Washington.” Like Smer, Republika also stresses the importance of the V4. It is explicitly stated that the movement wishes to cooperate with countries in the East, namely Russia, China, and the BRICS countries, while respecting their different political systems. Their FP’s goal is to protect the Slovak nation. Examples of these threats include foreign embassies, NGOs, and globalist structures. There is an explicit call to “protect Slovak families from dangerous ideologies”. These ideologies are likely a reference to LGBT acceptance, multiculturalism, and general liberal democratic values. In short, Republika advocates for FP that reduces the role of international cooperation to only economic terms. The disregard for Western liberal values is apparent, and these are even labeled as a threat to families. Republika’s FP sounds more radical than Smer’s. Nonetheless, they share the key argument, which is to advocate for solely national interests, and to return more power to the nation state.

To summarize, this chapter has introduced populism as a political strategy to mobilize support. The focus in this approach should be on the actual actions of the politicians, who are seen as manipulators of public opinion, rather than representatives of a certain ideology. Populism in Slovakia has had many faces, and experienced a revival around the 2015 refugee crisis. Since then, levels of pro-Russian support have been steady in Slovakia. This is due to numerous factors, such as the historical grounding of narratives related to the first Slovak national movements, strong presence of alternative media, and the tendency to demonize the West. In terms of FP, we have

seen that both examined parties share a similar wish to make Slovakia more independent, and advocate for national interests. While the populists understand the importance of some level of European integration, they are unhappy with the current state of the EU, and would prefer for it to focus only on economic cooperation. The ideological grounding of the proposed foreign policies is rooted in national interests, and the idea of cooperation with other countries on an ideological level is refused.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

This thesis uses a qualitative research design applied to a single case study. By analyzing the politicians' statements in order to construct a frame, this paper provides an in-depth look into the narrative of populist Slovak politicians regarding the war in Ukraine. In the context of Central Europe and the V4, Slovakia's political scene is unique. As mentioned in the previous chapter, compared to the neighboring countries, Slovakia has the highest levels of pro-Russian attitudes and mistrust of the West among the general population. Moreover, both right- and left-wing populist reasoning are present.

### **Method of data collection and selection**

This study examines the views of Slovak populist politicians who have a history of making pro-Russian statements. Due to the Slovak political scene being abundant with such individuals, a stricter selection had to be made. Therefore, two selection criteria were established:

1. The politician must have a demonstrable history of pro-Russian inclinations
2. The politicians must have had agency in the given timeframe of this study, meaning they must have been MPs so that they could directly vote on policies regarding Ukraine

The selected politicians are:

- Ľuboš Blaha (Smer)
- Robert Fico (Smer)
- Milan Mazurek (ĽSNS/Republika)
- Milan Uhrík (ĽSNS/Republika): MEP since 2019

Milan Uhrík differs from the rest of these politicians. He served as an MP in the Slovak Parliament 2016-2019, when he was elected to the European Parliament (EP).

Considering that Uhrík was number 6 on the candidate list for ĽSNS in the 2016 elections, and the party obtained 17 seats in the 2020 elections, it is to be assumed that had Uhrík not been an MEP, he would be a MP in Slovakia in 2022-2023. Nonetheless, Uhrík had the possibility to exercise agency in the EP, as well as propagate his views via the other Republika members active in Slovakia at the time, and he is therefore deemed to fit the criteria to be selected for this study. The selection of Milan Mazurek, an MP in Slovakia, complements Uhrík in order to provide a better understand of Republika's framing. Similarly, the choice of Ľuboš Blaha, the politician with most followers on social media (Hudec, 2022; Školkay and Daniš, 2022), complements the

choice of the leader of Smer, Robert Fico. While Blaha is very outspoken on social media, it is ultimately Fico who is the main face of the party.

This list and the scope of this research leave out some other well-known populist politicians. Perhaps the most salient name in the extremist political scene of Slovakia is Marian Kotleba. He lost his mandate in April 2022, when he received a six-month suspended sentence for supporting movements oppressing human rights. Three families had been given financial aid by Kotleba, with the checks being valued at €1488. Both numbers, 14 and 88, have neo-Nazi symbolism (Drábik, 2022). Štefan Harabin (Vlast') and Andrej Danko (SNS), have also been excluded from the study due to not holding an MP mandate in the given time, and thus having no way of impacting policy. Also absent are members of the SME RODINA movement, led by Boris Kollár. SME RODINA was excluded because of the party's support of offering military aid to Ukraine (Kysel', 2022).

The data in this thesis comes from the social media profiles of politicians, namely Facebook and Telegram. These platforms were chosen because all selected politicians, except for Ľuboš Blaha, actively use them. Blaha was banned by Facebook in June 2022. Moreover, these politicians do not make use of personal websites. Only Milan Uhrík has one, and it consists mainly of links to videos on his social media. Only personal profiles are considered, profiles of the respective parties of the politicians are left out as it is not always clear whose view they present. There have been calls to focus on content on social media, which is especially relevant for research focusing on radical politicians. These often benefit from spreading misinformation and mobilization using these channels, as their mainstream presence might be limited due to their controversy

(Lukacovic, 2022). For the purpose of this study and due to limitations of data processing, only text posts are considered, leaving out videos and pictures. The selected time frame is the first year of the war in Ukraine: 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023. This was selected in order to capture both the immediate and later reactions of the chosen politicians to the invasion and its immediate aftermath. While the invasion itself and the influx of refugees in Slovakia were the main issues at the beginning, after the initial shock had passed, other topics became more prominent. Examples include the question of supplying weapons to Ukraine and providing financial aid to Ukrainians, energy security, and general long term approach to the conflict.

### **Method of data processing**

One of the main advantages of using electronic documents is the possibility of computer processing, which is a time-efficient manner of working with sources (Davie and Wyatt, 2021). Although there are automated natural language processing (NLP) programs which can evaluate the contents of documents, they become difficult to use in little-spoken languages. Slovak is a good example of this, as the NLP technologies were said to be in their very beginnings in 2014 (Hladek et al; 2014), and even nowadays there are few resources available (Garabík, 2023). The analysis will therefore be carried out manually. Another possible limitation when it comes to processing electronic sources is that the distinction between private and public information is not always clearly defined (Davie and Wyatt, 2021). This is not an issue in this research, however, as the politicians use public social media profiles where they knowingly interact with the public. Documents where this distinction might be problematic, such as comments or reposts, are not subject to analysis.

The data was processed as follows. Firstly, the profiles were scraped of all text messages from the relevant time range. Secondly, duplicate posts were sorted out. Lastly, five keywords and their respective lemmas were used to filter out relevant posts which mention at least one of the keywords.

## Keywords

Five keywords were selected in order to filter out the relevant posts about the conflict in Ukraine. The selected keywords are: Russia, soldier, Ukraine, war, and weapon. These also include adjectives and all relevant lemmas, as used in the Slovak language. For instance, the word “Ukraine” also encompasses the adjective “Ukrainian” in all grammatical genders and cases.

**Table 1**

*Posts overview*

	<b>weapon</b>	<b>soldier</b>	<b>war</b>	<b>Ukraine</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>UNIQUE POSTS</b>
<b>Ľuboš Blaha</b>	99	25	207	206	243	347
<b>Robert Fico</b>	12	3	47	79	57	121
<b>Milan Mazurek</b>	32	23	100	105	89	138
<b>Milan Uhrík</b>	68	24	155	146	115	308
<b>MENTIONS TOTAL</b>	211	75	509	536	504	<b>TOTAL 914</b>

## **Method of analysis**

Framing is a process of characterizing information in order to influence how it is perceived by the audience. Different framing strategies have been proven to influence the way people evaluate situations (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Alitavoli, 2019). In the field of political communication, Robert Entman's definition of framing is the most popular one (Olmastroni, 2014; Brugman and Burgers, 2018). "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p.52). Increasing salience is done by "placement or repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols" (p.53). At the same time, framing is just as much about what is being said as it is about what is omitted, due to the fact that receivers form their opinions on the basis of the information provided. By omitting information, the narrative is stripped of possible alternative solutions, and facts can be left out in order to make one's narrative more persuasive (Entman, 1993; Perla, 2011).

The main advantage of Entman's approach is the possibility to identify frames on the basis of the function that it serves within a given discourse. In the context of this thesis, frame-making utterances are defined based on their ability to make the reader support or oppose a given side in a conflict (Olmastroni, 2014). According to Entman (1993; 2004), substantive frames have four basic functions, and perform at least two of them in a given case:

1. Defining the problem
2. Identifying causes



3. Making moral judgments
4. Suggesting remedies

The analysis part of the thesis examines how these four functions are represented in the discourse within the 1st year of the war in Ukraine. This frame will also be connected to the general foreign policy view of these politicians in order to demonstrate how the frame fits their long term political strategies and goals.

## **Analysis**

### **Defining the problem**

This chapter discusses how politicians define and frame the problems related to the war in Ukraine. These can be divided into two broad categories - international and national problems. The international problems refer to issues concerning other countries, namely the fact that this war is seen as proxy war between Russia and the West and that there are double standards when assessing military aggression of Russia and that of the US. The national problems are those that are presented as directly affecting Slovak citizens. They mostly focus on the negative economic impact of sanctions against Russia and endangering national security.

### **International problems**

Blaha (2022I) directly calls the conflict a proxy war. "It is a lie that this is not an America's war against Russia [...] Let's sum it up. It is America's war." In another post

he says that “The West’s strategy is to make the war as long as possible. American weapon manufacturing industry is blooming, sales of LNG gas are skyrocketing, the hated Russia is at war, and West can happily disseminate racist hatred towards the Russians (Blaha, 2022r). Blaha therefore believes that the West, especially the US, are motivated to continue this proxy war in order to achieve financial profit from the sale of weaponry and liquid natural gas (LNG). LNG is a substitute of gas that would normally be imported from Russia via gas pipes. Milan Uhrík bases his argument on Western generous military aid. “The EU announced yesterday that it wants to train at least 15 000 Ukrainian soldiers. From the European “peace tool” they will also get 3 billion euros and weapons to fight the war. Let’s sum it up:

- The West massively supplies Ukrainians with weapons
- EU takes Ukrainians and turns them into soldiers
- Western secret services are telling Ukrainians where and how to fight

But the West otherwise pretends it is not at war with Russia” (Uhrík, 2022a). According to him, if it was not in the West’s interest that Russia is defeated, there would not be as much support flowing to Ukraine. The main problem that arises from this conflict being a proxy war is a difficult resolution. Not only Russia and Ukraine, but also the West are involved, and the US financially benefit from the hot war. It is allegedly in the US interest that the conflict continues, and this can be assured by militarily supporting Ukraine.

Another issues that the populists draw attention to is the hypocrisy and double standards of assessing military aggression. This strategy can be labelled as whataboutism, because instead of focusing on the current issue, attention is instead

drawn to other problems, namely American military interventions in other countries. Whataboutism effectively minimizes Russia's actions in Ukraine, because they are made to sound like insignificant, regular occurrences that only attract attention because it is Russia that is presented as the aggressor.

“Do they want sanctions against Russia? Then let them also implement sanctions against the US that wage the most wars in the world! Do they want to stop importing oil and gas from Russia? Then they should not be importing them from war-obsessed America either. Anything else is hypocrisy” (Uhrík, 2022e). When explaining why he voted against labelling Russia a terrorist state, Uhrík says “If we used the same guidelines, then terrorist states would also be the US and Ukraine, which has also committed atrocities” (Uhrík, 2022g). Mazurek mentions pro-European Slovak coalition politicians who condemn the war and support Ukraine. “They celebrated and excused all US-waged wars. This war only bothers them because Russia leads it. Unlike them, we object against war out of principle regardless of which side of the world the aggressor comes from” (Mazurek, 2022b).

Smer politicians also refer to this double standard. “They babble about peace, but in the past 30 years they managed to destroy Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yugoslavia, and other sovereign states” (Blaha, 2022m). Robert Fico primarily used his post to attack the coalition, who shut down some alternative pro-Russian media sites disseminating misinformation about the war. “Everyone who will claim on the internet that when it comes to killing civilians, it does not matter whether it is Russian or American bombs, will be silenced” (Fico, 2022d).

These statements reflect the general tendency to condemn Western actions and, in Fico's case, attack the coalition. As already mentioned, Slovakia records relatively high support for Russia combined with distrust of the US. Therefore, such discourse is appealing to voters who hold similar views.

### **National security concerns**

Milan Mazurek expresses concerns about supplying weapons to Ukraine. "Supplying weapons to one of the fighting parties can be seen as an open act of animosity by the other party. Do you want to declare war on Russia? We cannot act as if we were at war in Russia, but formally claim we are at peace!" (Mazurek, 2022c) He also believes that allowing NATO soldiers on Slovak territory makes Slovakia "an important military target" (Mazurek, 2023). When it comes to weapons, another concern is that Slovakia should not be giving up their weapons, most importantly their air defense system, to Ukraine, as this endangers national security. "The defense of our airspace is fully dependent on foreign states. The economy is dependent on foreign states. The media is owned by foreign states...a colony. They have sold us" (Blaha, 2022e). There are also concerns regarding the refugees crossing the border. Immediately after the war erupted and masses of refugees flocked to the borders of neighboring countries, Milan Uhrík brought attention to a photo of people of African descent trying to evacuate from Ukraine to Poland and Slovakia. "The Slovaks are a hospitable nation, and we will gladly help Ukrainians in need. But under no circumstances will we have our solidarity misused by speculators from Africa" (Uhrík, 2022b). Considering that Republika profiles itself as a nationalistic, anti-Islam, and anti-immigrant party, it is not surprising that they would use a picture of refugees to

further their propaganda. It is not clear how exactly these dark skinned people on the Ukrainian side of the border would endanger national security. Still, as time went on, even Ukrainians were presented as a threat. When talking about the coalition and the president, Blaha says that “They cannot even protect Slovakia from thick-necked mafia that is coming here from Ukraine” (Blaha, 2022d). Demonizing refugees is a simple tactic that instills fear and uncertainty in people. Considering that Slovakia strongly opposed the idea of migration quotas related to the 2015 migration crisis, the idea that refugees and migrants are an ultimate threat to the people had already been instilled before the war.

### **Economic impact of sanctions against Russia**

Slovakia imports virtually all of its gas from Russia. The sanctions limiting oil and gas imports from Russia were therefore feared to have a devastating impact on the economy. The sanctions are generally considered to be more harmful to the EU than they are to Russia. “Weakening Russia by cutting ourselves off from gas and oil, rejoicing that we shot Russia in the knees, not realizing that by doing so we shot ourselves in the head, is an approach that endangers Slovakia’s energy and economic security” (Fico, 2022e). Mazurek similarly criticizes the government. “The hysterical reaction of our government to the current events only worsens the situation in Europe. Not a word about peace, just a desire to destroy industry in Slovakia by thoughtless sanctions” (Mazurek, 2022f). Blaha calls the sanctions on oil “an economic suicide” (Blaha, 2022o). While examining the effect of the sanctions deserves its own research, none of the politicians provide any constructive criticism. This rhetoric is the same as that regarding refugees. The ultimate goal is to scare the population enough that they

demand the government to steer away from the current course of action, which is supporting Ukraine and standing together with other EU nations in doing so.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, this chapter presented international and national problems directly stemming from the war in Ukraine. The main concerns from the international perspective are the fact that this is a proxy war of the US and Russia, and the double standards when the US is not scrutinized for their own military actions the same way Russia is. From the national perspective, the tactic is to scare the population by stressing the imminent dangers to Slovakia's national and economic security.

## **Identifying causes**

This chapter explains the alleged causes for the war in Ukraine. The key question here is - why is there war? Although none of the analyzed politicians openly commend the war, they also do not seem to see Russia's aggression and attempts to maintain a sphere of influence as the cause of the conflict. While the politicians agree that the war is a tragedy that must stop, they do not put any blame on Russia. Instead, the causes can be divided into two categories. The first category has an external aspect, namely that the war is due to NATO expansion, and American interests. The second category, although not mentioned by all politicians, focuses on internal factors within Ukraine, the alleged Ukrainian Nazi groups, that must be annihilated.

## West's fault

The populists generally agree that the war is the fault of the West, more specifically of the US and NATO. “The American war organization NATO is a relic of the Cold War. Its constant expansion is one of the main causes of the current conflicts in Europe. NATO hawks are a part of the problem, not a solution leading to peace” (Uhrík, 2022f). Blaha calls NATO “a war pact that destroyed Yugoslavia and Lybia” (Blaha, 2022c). He states that there is a clear connection between this war and NATO. “Russia felt endangered by NATO’s expansion towards her borders. It is nonsense that Russia was not threatened” (Blaha, 2022f). In another instance, he writes that “If it were not for the NATO expansion, nobody would have to die today. There would not have to be war in Ukraine. There could have been peace” (Blaha, 2022g). He also implies that the West enticed the conflict by inviting Ukraine to its structures “[...] war could have been prevented, had Ukraine been neutral and agreed with Russia, that there would be no NATO weapons on its territory” (Blaha, 2022i). On the topic of NATO expansion, he also adds that “[Gorbachev] agreed with the Americans, that NATO would not expand one millimeter to the East. In a few years, there were NATO troops on Russia’s border and wanted to take control of Ukraine, which is a direct threat to Russian territory. This is what happens when you trust Americans” (Blaha, 2022q). Mazurek also speaks of “Russia being encircled by American troops” and blames the war on Western actions “There was a threat that ignorance, sanctions, and pressure on Russia once turn into a strong counterreaction [...]” (Mazurek, 2022c). Robert Fico similarly believes that the aggressor is the US, and that Europe is complicit by being too weak to voice their own opinion: “Looking at the conflict in Ukraine, I see a weak EU without an opinion, blindly

following the interests of the US” (Fico, 2022f). Within this topic, we observe a common pattern of describing the US and NATO as aggressive actors. Russia is presented as a country under attack by NATO, who simply had to defend her borders and her place in the world. This aggression can be interpreted as both physical and ideological. Russia may have felt the need to defeat herself from the physical presence of NATO close to her borders. Also, she may have been worried about the West pulling Ukraine into their sphere of influence. Being an illiberal regime, Russia fears the expansion of liberal democracy. The expansion and need to defeat therefore has multiple dimensions.

### **Ukraine’s fault**

Some of the populists adopt the Russian rhetoric and blame the fascists or Nazis in Ukraine for the conflict. The terms Nazi and fascists seem to be used interchangeably. This explanation of the cause of the war seems to be playing a minor role, as the majority of the blame is placed on Russia. The fact that not all politicians even mention this topic supports this assumption. Blaha fully follows the Russian explanation of the invasion by saying, “Even though we disagree with the conflict in Ukraine [...] we must not forget what the Bandera-like regime has been committing in Ukraine. In the past 8 years, more than 14 000 people have died in the Donbass - the culprits are the Ukrainian army, neo-Nazi groups, the Azov battalion, and all powers that funded this hell, especially the Americans” (Blaha, 2022s). He draws a part of his evidence from the Ukrainians naming their 10th Mountain Assault Brigade “Edelweiss” and makes a direct connection to Zelenskyi being a nazi. “ZELENSKYI IS A FASCIST! Let’s say this loud and clear. If anyone names a Ukrainian mountain assault brigade with the Nazi name “Edelweiss”, there is no other explanation than this person being a



fascist. [...] He names them after fascists that massacred Slovaks [in WW2]. [...] We do not want anything to do with fascists. And Zelenskyi proved today that he is simply a fascist” (Blaha, 2023c). Robert Fico does not directly blame the Ukrainian fascists for causing the conflict, however, he confirms that they are active in Ukraine. “[...] It is also not true what the [Slovak] president says, that we are Ukrainians. We are not, and I do not want fascists to fight for us on the side of the Ukrainian army” (Fico, 2022h).

Representatives of the Republika movement do not make any claims related to Nazism or fascism in Ukraine. One possible explanation is that they do not believe in those, or do not see them as driving forces behind the conflict. The other possibility is that they purposefully avoid mentioning these topics, as their predecessor, ĽSNS, was known to propagate Nazism, and they do not want to draw attention towards such issues.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, there are two main categories of alleged causes of the war - Western expansion, and Ukrainian Nazism. Within the argument of Western expansion, most blame is put on NATO and on American interests. Russia is then justified in invading Ukraine, because according to this narrative, the country is merely protecting their national security. In the debate on Nazism, some Ukrainian groups are accused of being Nazis and of murdering civilians in the Donbas since 2014. Once again, this argument excuses Russia’s actions, because Russia is seen as an eternal protector against Nazism, due to their victory in WW2. All in all, this conflict is presented as a provocation of Russia that had to be stopped.

## Moral judgements

This chapter presents moral judgements made about the conflict in Ukraine. In a war situation, making moral judgements about the parties can sway people's opinion on the issue to the desired side. Notably, there are very few moral judgements directly related to the war. Criticizing Russia from a moral standpoint is wholly absent. However, positive judgements are made about Russia's role in WW2. The fact that Red Army liberated Europe from German Nazism is seen as a basis for endless thankfulness and respect towards Russia. Ukraine is morally criticized for supporting fascism. Finally, moral judgements are made about Western hypocrisy and double standards that were elaborated on in the previous chapters.

### Red Army liberation and fascism in Ukraine

Luboš Blaha compares the current criticism and condemnation of Russia's to a situation like in WW2. "We will never forget who collaborated with the Nazis. Names like Bandera and Suhevich, whose statues are being built in Ukraine up to this day. They are responsible for tens of thousands of victims. [...] Our grandfathers defeated fascism. But it is coming back. Again the same hatred towards the Russians like under Hitler's rule. [...] We thank the Red Army for liberating us from fascism. And we thank the Russian nation for their sacrifice and bravery. You will not defeat the truth, Russophobes! Glory to our liberators!" (Blaha, 2022h). "War is evil, every war is evil. But we must never forget who liberated us in the most horrifying war. We must never forget to thank the Russian nation for their sacrifice in 1941-1945, so that we can also live in

freedom and peace today.” (Blaha, 2022n). “We were not liberated by the US, we were liberated by the Red Army, and the Russian nation brought the ultimate sacrifice. We thank them!” (Blaha, 2022p). On a different occasion, he says that the West’s ultimate goal is “to destroy Russia” (Blaha, 2023a). The way Blaha structures this narrative makes it sound like this is another world war where Russia needs to step in to fight fascism, this time in Ukraine. He appeals to the moral values of his audience when he stresses the need to always be thankful and to never forget what Russia did for Europe and for Slovakia during WW2. He attempts to invoke pro-Russian sentiment by saying it was Russia, not the West, who liberated Europe from Nazism, and that the West currently works on destroying Russia. However, this rhetoric diverts attention away from the current conflict. By repeatedly bringing up historical events in which Russia’s involvement are seen as positive, he indirectly discredits the possibility that Russia can be the aggressor in the current war. According to his logic, Russia has always been the good guy, who is currently being attacked by the West that wants to destroy it.

Blaha also objects to the Slovak president presenting Ukraine as a victim in this war. “In your speech you painted Ukraine as an innocent victim of the conflict, as if you had forgotten about the burning of people in Odessa, the death of thousands in Donbass or the growth of neo-Nazi forces in Ukrainian society. Are you not bothered by the Ukrainian government’s honoring of Bandera, whose fascist unit murdered Slovak children? Are you not bothered by glorifying a mass murderer who let women be raped? Not bothered that Bandera’s units skinning people and cutting pregnant women’s stomachs open? Is this all alright? You talk about humanitarian aid. Where have you been during those long 8 years when people in Donbass suffered because of the

Ukrainian army?” (Blaha, 2022a). In this case, Blaha once again invokes a familiar historical frame of fascism that people can easily recognize. This is another example of attempting to raise pro-Russian sentiments by painting Ukraine as the aggressor, and Russia returning to the familiar role of fighting fascism. Considering that Blaha does not refer to any Russian war brutalities, it is apparent that this statement aims to taint Ukraine’s image.

Notably, other examined politicians do not make such statements. This can be due to their ideological convictions, or practical reasons. Robert Fico’s statements in general are tamer than Blaha’s, and express a lower level of pro-Russian sentiment. He even openly speaks of “Russian aggression in Ukraine” (Fico, 2022c), something that Blaha never accuses Russia of. Republika’s politicians could once again refrain from directly accusing Ukraine of fascism due to their own past, where they were, as members of ĽSNS, accused of supporting neo-Nazism.

## **Hypocrisy**

Another topic where moral judgments are made is the already mentioned hypocrisy of double standards, where Russian military actions are presented differently from US involvements in military conflicts in the past.

“The conflict in Ukraine reveals the true characters and intentions of many. The most disgusting part of society that never objected to any bloodshed, endless bombing, terrorism financing, murdering women and children thinks they can represent the standard of good morals and justice.” (Mazurek, 2022d). Here, Mazurek accuses Western countries and their supporters of immoral actions and of double standards. His colleague Uhrík makes a similar statement. “So Europeans with common sense are

“right wing extremists” to them, but they do not object against the Azov battalion. Hypocritical fools who pull Europe and Slovakia into war and an economic catastrophe” (Uhrík, 2022c). Blaha uses the example of NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia as an argument that the West does not have the right to make moral judgments. “Western states, that nowadays scream that Putin is the new Hitler, celebrated the American bombs falling on Belgrade and even recognized Kosovo. They can only shut up today. What moral right do they have to reproach Russia in Ukraine? We have always condemned all wars and therefore have the right to say that we also condemn the war in Ukraine. They lost their right in 1999.” (Blaha, 2022b).

These statements paint the West as an immoral actor. Within this narrative, it is not the place of the West to criticize Russia, because the West had their own share of aggressive behavior. As already mentioned, this whataboutism, strengthened by making appeals to readers’ morality, diverts attention away from the current problem and minimizes Russia’s actions because “the West did it too.” By repeatedly evoking an us against them dichotomy, Slovakia is presented as not part of the West that behaved aggressively in the past. This is a stepping stone to possibly taking this narrative one step further and arguing that Slovakia geopolitically belongs between the West and Russia. This can potentially either lead to the argument that Slovakia should stay neutral and not send any help to Ukraine, as not to anger Russia. Another, more extreme, option could be to argue that Slovakia cannot possibly side with the West because of their immoral actions, and that it should seek allegiance with Russia instead, because Russia proved their morality by defeating Nazism in 1945.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, this chapter presented moral judgements connected to the war in Ukraine. Ľuboš Blaha, the most radical pro-Russian sympathizer, stresses that Slovakia owes eternal thanks to Russia due to the Red Army liberating Europe from the Nazis in 1945. He evokes the familiar frame of fighting fascism and claims that Ukraine supports Nazism. Others, however, do not present such ideas. Negative moral judgements are made about the West and their alleged hypocrisy when it comes to evaluating their own versus Russia's military actions.

## **Suggesting remedies**

This chapter examines the suggested remedies to problems stemming from the war. They can be divided into three main categories. The first category is advocating for accepting Russia's demands in order to restore peace. The second category talks about diversifying strategic partners in order to limit negative economic impact of the war on Slovakia. The final category focuses on prioritizing policies that benefit Slovakia, regardless of the impact they may have on the international stage. Only the first category actually offers solutions to the conflict from an international perspective. The remaining two categories are focused on helping Slovakia and its citizens.

## **Restore peace in Europe**

The examined populists all speak in favor of ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible. Nonetheless, aside from promoting peace talks, and not sending weapons to Ukraine in order to not prolong the conflict, they do not offer any realistic solutions. Robert Fico is an example of this. He believes that sending weapons to Ukraine only prolongs the war. He claims that “The civilizational interest of Europe is peace in Ukraine” (Fico, 2022b). According to him, the West cannot win the war against Russia, and he calls for peace negotiations between the USA, Russia, and the EU (Fico, 2023). Interestingly enough, he does not mention that Ukraine, the country on whose territory the war is being waged, should also be present at these negotiations. Ľuboš Blaha writes that the remedy to end the conflict is to address the causes. “They need Ukraine to be neutral and for the Nazis to not murder people in the Donbass” (Blaha, 2022j). This explains why Fico does not think that Ukraine should be present at peace negotiations. Based on these statements, Ukraine should not have agency over itself and over its allegiances with other states. The country must remain what they call “neutral”, which means under Russia’s sphere of influence, in order to restore peace. Ultimately, it should be the other countries who decide the fate of Ukraine. A practical application of this logic could be, for example, that EU and NATO would agree to not inviting Ukraine to these structures, and Russia would get more influence in Eastern and Southeastern Ukraine, possibly keeping the annexed territories. In other words, restoring peace means giving in to Russia’s demands.

Blaha directly connects the war to Smer's election campaign. He threatens a potential mobilization of Slovak citizens. He says that people are afraid that "they will be sent to die side by side with the Bandera supporters in a conflict that has nothing to do with Slovakia [...] If you vote for the liberals, you vote for war. If you vote for Smer, you vote for peace" (Blaha, 2023b). Nevertheless, he fails to mention how exactly Smer would assure peace. Slovakia's potential decision to not send weapons to Ukraine is not a sustainable solution to end the conflict. The populists lack realistic long-term goals, and prefer resorting to passivity and ignoring the conflict instead of offering realistic solutions. Milan Uhrík says "In the EU we called for ending the military and financial aid to Ukraine and for the beginning of peace negotiations [...] Peace negotiations are the only way to stop the war. [...] Let's do everything for the killings to stop, and for the restoration of peace" (Uhrík, 2023). In the case of this particular quote, it is not clear how ending support to Ukraine would ensure anything other than military defeat of Ukraine, which would not guarantee long-lasting peace.

### **Diversify strategic partners**

Milan Uhrík proposes that Slovakia needs to find other strategic partners in order to prosper in the long-run. In this message, he simultaneously expresses dissatisfaction with where the West is heading and speaks against Western values. "Progressives" in this case refer to those holding liberal democratic views and values. He insinuates that the future of Slovakia lies in cooperation with non-Western countries, such as Russia. "The West is degenerating, and the geopolitical and economic center of the world is shifting to the Euro-Asian region. Progressives see enemies there. We see partners for future prosperity" (Uhrík, 2022g).



Ľuboš Blaha (Blaha, 2022k) refers to an article from The Economist, that separates Europe into two camps - the “peace camp”, and the “justice camp.” The peace camp’s motivation is said to be to end the war as soon as possible, while the other camp seeks the defeat of Russia. As of June 2022, the peace camp countries were thought to be, for example, Germany and France. According to Blaha, the justice camp, which includes e.g., CEE countries and the Baltic States, is motivated by “Russophobia and financial gains from the war.” On the other hand, he stresses that Slovakia’s key strategic partners are European countries such as Germany and France. Blaha states that, according to The Economist, these countries support a peaceful solution to the war. He contrasts this position with that of CEE and Baltic States, who would prefer seeing the defeat of Russia. Blaha says that Europe needs peace and that sooner or later the countries will have to admit that it is impossible to fight Russia forever. Contrary to Uhrík, Blaha sees Germany and France as key strategic partners, as opposed to “[...] some Lilliputians from the Baltics [...]”. He believes that Europe has to restore peace with Russia, because if Russia turns towards China as their main strategic partner, it could result in a “catastrophe” for the West. Therefore, in order to avoid this situation, restoring European relations with Russia should be the main priority.

### **Advocate for national interests**

Fico refuses to “[...] satisfy American, Russian, or Ukrainian interests [...]”. He claims to be “ready to help, but not at the expense of Slovakia’s security and citizens’ quality of life [...] Slovakia always has to be the top priority” (Fico, 2022a). Mazurek agrees that the government must prioritize interests of Slovakia, and not those of the

US (Mazurek, 2022e). Uhrík similarly claims that if Republika were in power, they would focus on financial aid to Slovak citizens: “[...] instead of buying weapons for Zelenskyi, we would surely rather help Slovaks combat the increasing prices” (Uhrík, 2022d). This rhetoric is an expression of the populist foreign policy goal to approach politics from the perspective of national states. They do not portray Slovakia as a member of a greater international community. In fact, they only advocate for solutions benefitting Slovakia, while ignoring the bigger picture, such as the impact of such policies on Slovakia’s place in the EU, or on the actual conflict in Ukraine. The politicians sound ready to sacrifice Ukraine in order to gain domestic electoral support.

## **Conclusion**

These politicians do not present peace in Ukraine as their ultimate goal. In fact, their expressed intention is to solve the issues in Slovakia that arose as a result of the war. These include diversifying strategic partners, although there is no consensus on whom these partners should be, and only side with those who have similar views. National interests are prioritized regardless of the impact this may have on the war, therefore, the financial aid flowing to Ukraine should be redirected to Slovakia’s citizens instead. From the international perspective, the main proposed goal is to appease Russia, forcing official neutrality on Ukraine. However, this is no true neutrality, as the country is meant to stay under Russia’s control in her sphere of influence. Moreover, all military support should be stopped, and Ukraine should be virtually sacrificed to Russia. All of these proposed remedies are vague and offer no real long-term solutions to the ongoing conflict. They seem to be articulated because the politicians expect that this is what the people want to hear.

## Discussion

The frame that the analyzed politicians present can be summarized as follows. The war was caused by NATO and Ukraine itself. Western expansionism and Nazi supporters in Ukraine provoked Russia until it retaliated. The international problem that is given attention is Western hypocrisy, because this conflict is treated very differently from previous wars where the US were involved. Due to this hypocrisy, the West is presented as an immoral actor. On the other hand, Russia is morally good because it liberated Europe from Nazism in 1945, and now tries to eradicate Nazism once again in Ukraine. Slovakia is directly affected by this war due to potential national and energy security concerns, mostly as a result of weapon deliveries to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. In order to restore peace, the West must stop sending military aid to Ukraine, and the country must vow to not seek membership in Western institutions. Slovak interests must take top priority, and the country should only take actions that benefit it.

This narrative is rather simple and therefore easily understandable. It evokes familiar concepts, such as criticism of the West, fight against fascism, and concerns about national security and rising prices. It addresses concerns of ordinary citizens, many of whom feel pro-Russian sentiment, do not see Slovakia as a Western state, and are not sure about where the country should belong geopolitically. Statements focusing on the need to withdraw from the conflict take away the need to solve this dilemma. By not taking a strong stance, it is possible to appeal to pro-Russian voters now, and, at a different time, take a more pro-Western turn that would attract others. This avoidance to

take a firm stance and keeping other options open fits the theory that populism is a strategic tool to gain power and is not ideologically driven.

This frame fits the main FP goals of these parties. Firstly, both the frame and FP emphasize national interests, which should be top priority. Secondly, the frame refrains from strong criticism of Russia, which agrees with FP goals to restore relations with Russia as soon as possible for Slovakia's economic benefit. Thirdly, criticizing the West within the frame agrees with the FP goal to work on relations with non-Western countries as well. If the public frequently hears criticism of the West, it will be more likely to support cooperation with other states that they do not perceive as negative actors. Lastly, in terms of values, within the frame there is moral condemnation of Western actions and hypocrisy. In FP documents, both Smer and Republika are either negative or reserved about Western ideological values and refuse to fully commit to them. It can be concluded that the frame and FP are mutually reinforcing.

While this research was being conducted, parliamentary elections took place in Slovakia in September 2023. Ukraine was one of the most salient topic of election campaigns. Even though Republika did not get in the parliament, Smer won and Robert Fico became Prime Minister once again. Despite having been outspoken about ceasing military support to Ukraine during the election campaign (Reuters, 2023), Fico did not act on any of his promises. During the European Council meeting in October 2023, he supported a €50 billion aid package to Ukraine. He also signed the resolution that reads "The European Union will continue to provide strong financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people for as long as it takes" (European Council, 2023). In terms of weapons, Slovakia had in fact already sent

everything it could to Ukraine, and Fico's promise to stop does not seem to affect privately-owned weapon manufacturing businesses taking orders from Western Europe, as these greatly benefit the economy. Fico employs two different rhetoric styles for domestic and for international audiences in order to maximize personal gains on both fronts. Domestically, he succeeded in the elections using slogans that appeal to the pro-Russian part of the electorate. Internationally, he knows Slovakia has little leverage in the EU due to its size. He realizes the vital importance of EU membership and funds, he is therefore not expected to side with politicians like Orbán in order to build an illiberal block within the EU (Gosling, 2023). This is a prime example of using populism as a political strategy, showing that this theory is suitable for studying Slovakia. Fico does not plan on acting upon his election promises, nor adhere to the rhetoric he presented during the researched time period. He used them in order to secure domestic support and to ultimately win the elections. Considering that he was not projected to win, this strategy proved to be extremely successful. He did not build his campaign on an honest desire to change the course of action in Ukraine. He broke his promises the first chance he could, supporting exactly what he vowed to stop. By using antiestablishment appeals, he managed to mobilize the electorate and seize power again.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this research explored how Slovak populist politicians frame the war in Ukraine, and how this framing is connected to their FP. By approaching populism as a political strategy, we can see interpret this framing as goal-oriented behavior that aims to gain electoral support. The framing criticizes the West more often than it does Russia,

it advocates for passivity in international affairs, and prioritizes national interests of Slovakia, which are all connected to the FP plans of the analyzed parties. Fico won the recent elections and immediately broke all his promises to stop supporting Ukraine by signing, without objections, an EU resolution that also pledges continuous military aid to Ukraine. It is apparent that his promises to stop aid were not ideologically driven, but used as tools to gain popular support. This is a direct example of using populism as a political strategy.

This thesis is limited by only analyzing four politicians in the first year of the war. In order to fill these gaps, further studies could be conducted on other populist politicians, including those who did not hold an MP mandate at the time. Moreover, the time scope can be widened, and comparative studies can be conducted on framing around election time. A more comprehensive analysis should take into account other primary sources, such as speeches, TV debates, videos, interviews etc. Finally, analyzing Fico's upcoming term will be a good opportunity to compare his rhetoric before the elections and his actions now as a PM to illustrate how he uses populism as a strategic tool.

Understanding the framing of populist parties is beneficial when researching current European affairs. Populist parties have been on the rise, the most recent example including the electoral victory of the Netherlands' far-right leader, Geert Wilders. Slovak and Western populism share similar topics, such as prioritizing national interests and security concerns. The appeal of populism, its narratives and actual actions need to be studied in order to understand voting behavior. By letting populism

spread uncontrollably within Europe, there is a risk of internal fragmentation, leading to insecurity and conflict down the line.

Instead of assuming these politicians to be ideologically motivated and aiming to act on their promises out of personal convictions, this paper proposes to study populism as a tool of political strategy. Evoking sentiments that resonate with common people and addressing issues troubling many can bring electoral victory, even if no real solutions are proposed. Using establishment as the enemy is an easy way of blaming failures on others, and promising to correct them. The main goal is to get elected, as the electorate has little to no power to remove a populist from their position simply on the basis of not fulfilling their commitments. Populist framing and narratives can be used as tools to obtain political power, without actual action being taken.

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