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TOMÁŠ DVORSKÝ

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. Faculty of Arts
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2084-537X

GABRIEL EŠTOK

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. Faculty of Arts
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7269-1814

*Programme Differences between Czech and Slovak Social
Democratic Parties in the 2024 European Parliament Elections*

Różnice programowe między czeskimi i słowackimi partiami socjaldemokratycznymi w wyborach
do Parlamentu Europejskiego w 2024 r.

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the identification of major programme differences among social democratic political entities in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic during the 2024 European Parliament elections. It assesses the extent to which the programme documents and pre-election communications of the analysed political parties Sociální demokracie, Smer-SD, and Hlas-SD corresponded with the fundamental ideological principles of social democracy as defined by Heywood, as well as their alignment with the theoretical framework of social democracy. The content analysis shows that the Czech entity adheres to the ideological framework of social democracy, while the Slovak entities present tendencies toward nationalism and conservatism. This raises questions about the appropriateness of labelling the Slovak parties as social democratic, reflecting their significant deviation from this ideological framework in terms of political programs and practices.

Keywords: European Parliament, Hlas-SD, Smer-SD, Sociální demokracie, social democracy

INTRODUCTION

The 2024 European Parliament elections took place at a time of significant instability in the ongoing and emerging crises facing the Member States of the European Community. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis, accompanied by high inflation, have brought new social realities to which political elites must respond effectively. At the same time, the crises have served as a stimulus for the rise of radicalism and polarisation, which have become a factor jeopardizing society in many European countries. Despite the popular description of the European Parliament elections as second-order elections [Reif, Schmitt 1980; Šaradín 2008] this elections were the moment of reflection on this political and social issues, the expected consequence of which was to strengthen the voice and position of radical, populist and nationalist powers in the European Parliament itself. In a situation where such political powers are strengthening, it is more important what position the traditional and so-called system political parties will take. The potential retreat of traditional and established political parties has the potential to cause fundamental transformations in the nature of political partisanship and related transformations in party systems as such [Hynčica 2019]. The European Parliament elections in particular thus offer an opportunity to compare the political programmes and attitudes of selected actors at the same time and in relation to a selected issue. Furthermore, this comparison offers an opportunity to compare selected parts of the political spectrum in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, i.e. states in which the European integration project has had an intensive role in the political discourse from its very beginning, as Michal Skulínek [2020] points out.

The article is devoted to the analysis and comparison of selected political parties in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which ideologically position themselves in the category of social democracy. This ideological approach has a great tradition in both selected countries after 1993 and was one of the formative elements of the parliamentarism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The article contributes to the topic of specific characteristics of the formation of the Slovak and Czech party systems [Kopeček 2007; Leška 2010; Cabada et al. 2013; Bokša 2014; Charvát, Outlý 2014; Balík, Hloušek 2016; Smolecová, Šárovec 2021; Bardovič 2022; Lysek et al. 2020] as well as the debate on the ideological transformation of left-wing politics [Gbúrová, Koziak 2004; Bardovič 2017].

Social democracy has regularly participated or is currently participating in governmental power and has historically represented Slovakia and Czech Republic in the European Parliament and in the pan-European social democratic platform. In this article, attention is paid to the political parties of Sociální Demokracie (SOCDEM, formerly ČSSD), Smer – Slovenská sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD) and Hlas – Sociálna demokracia (Hlas-SD). In the period of the European Parliament elections in 2024, the selected entities were in a different situation. In Slovakia, the Smer-SD party, led by Robert Fico, is the winner of the last parliamentary elections in 2023

and the leader of the governing coalition. Hlas-SD, which was formed by splitting from Smer-SD in 2020, is a minor coalition partner along with the nationalist Slovak National Party. At the same time, Social Democracy in Slovakia achieved success by the victory of Hlas-SD chairman Peter Pellegrini in the presidential elections in early 2024. In contrast, Czech Republic's former Czech Social Democratic Party found itself out of parliament after the Chamber of Deputies elections in 2021, which resulted in a rebranding of the party accompanied by the renaming of the political entity to Social Democracy.

Comparing these parties in the context of the European Parliament elections thus offers an opportunity to analyse how social democracy in the Czech Republic and Slovakia evolved as well as how reflects current topics in European politics. It may also offer a perspective for comparing the commons and differences of entities that identify themselves within the same ideological framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK. METHODOLOGY AND SELECTION CRITERIA

Social democracy is defined in political science literature as a branch of socialism, formed in the middle of the 20th century. As Andrew Heywood argues, its formation was a consequence of the tendency of Western social democratic parties not only to adopt a parliamentary strategy, but also to reconsider socialist goals [Heywood 2008: 146–147]. In particular, these parties were not seeking to destroy capitalism but to reform or “humanise” it. The words social democracy therefore came to imply a certain balance between the market economy on the one hand, and state intervention on the other. The main features of social democracy include:

- social democracy upholds liberal democratic principles and accept the thesis that political change can and should be implemented peacefully and constitutionally;
- capitalism is seen as the only reliable way of creating wealth, so socialism is not qualitatively different from capitalism;
- capitalism is nevertheless judged to be morally defective, especially in the way it redistributes wealth. Capitalism is associated with structural inequality and poverty;
- the flaws of the capitalist system can be corrected by the state through economic and social engineering. The state is the guardian of the public and general interest;
- the nation-state is an expedient unit of political governance. For it possesses a considerable capacity to regulate economic and social life within its territory [*ibid.*: 146–147].

The aim of the paper is to characterise the similarities and differences between the electoral programme of social democratic subjects in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic in the European Parliament elections in 2024. The article provides

answers to two research questions – RQ1: To what extent did the programme documents and pre-election communication of the analysed political parties (SOCDEM, Smer-SD and Hlas-SD) correspond with the basic ideological principles of social democracy as defined by Heywood? And RQ2: To what extent do the programme documents and pre-election communication of the analysed political parties (SOCDEM, Smer-SD and Hlas-SD) correspond to the theoretical framework of social democracy?

The authors, using content analysis as the research method, reviewed the comparison of party policies and media statements made by politicians on the selected topic. To comparison, relevant social democratic entities from the Czech Republic and Slovakia were selected. The selection criteria for analysed political parties are active participation in the 2024 European Parliament elections and an explicit commitment to social democratic ideology in the party's statutes. Other selection criteria is the actual or former membership of the Party of European Socialists (PES), which is the most influential European political family uniting parties ideologically belonging to the category of socialist, social democratic or labour [PES: Members 2024]. This party is also the basis for the centre-left faction of the Social Democracy Group (S&D Group), which is one of the most influential political family in Europe [Socialists & Democrats 2024]. In the Party of European Socialists, the Social Democracy has full membership, while Smer-SD and Hlas-SD had their membership suspended after joining the government coalition with the Slovak National Party, which the PES in its press release described as “extreme right-wing” and the association with it as an act contrary to the progressive values and principles of the European family of socialists and social democrats [S&D Group to suspend Slovak MEPs 2023].

COMPARISON CRITERIA

The object of the comparison of the selected political entities is the electoral programme and campaign agenda for the European Parliament elections in 2024. The timeframe of the comparison is set for the period from 1 May 2024 to the date of the elections, i.e. in the Czech Republic 7–8 June 2024 and in Slovakia 8 June 2024. The period before the set date in Slovakia was primarily influenced by the election campaign and the presidential elections, which is why this period does not provide relevant inputs for our purposes.

The data collection was carried out on two levels 1) Analysis of the official party programme documents for the 2024 EP elections; 2) Monitoring of the official Facebook profiles of the selected parties. Monitoring of posts related to the EP elections, qualitative analysis of content by thematic focus and emotional context, quantification of the frequency of occurrence of selected key themes. The political agenda will be analysed on two levels, namely: the official programme document for the European Parliament elections and the campaign agenda. For the purposes of this paper, the campaign agenda is a synthesis of the content on the official websites related to the

European Parliament elections and the content on the official profiles of the selected political parties on Facebook, the most widespread social network in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, related to the European Parliament elections. The analysed content will be categorised according to thematic focus, based on which we will identify the main articulated narratives of political communication dedicated to the European Parliament elections. For the analysed content, we will focus both on the content of the given agenda and on the emotional context of the communication, i.e. whether it presents constructive or rejecting approach. The comparison will highlight the ideological affinity and difference of what social democracy currently represents in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In terms of research limitations we need take into the consideration uneven availability of pre-election programmes (Hlas-SD did not have any), focus to only one social medium (Facebook), risk of subjective factor in interpreting the emotional context of communication, risk of incomplete capture of all relevant posts on social medium, varying intensity of communication between parties on social medium.

CZECH AND SLOVAK SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS. OFFICIAL PROGRAMME DOCUMENTS

In the 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies, as Daniel Šárovec points out, the ČSSD targeted classic left-wing topics and the phenomenon of social assurance [Šárovec 2022]. The party did not win any mandates. This electoral failure, beside rebranding, did not lead to an ideological swing. Several months before the European elections, the Czech Social Democracy refused pre-election cooperation with Strana Levice (The Left Party), which is ideologically oriented towards the radical to far-left fraction of the European Parliament, The Left in the European Parliament (GEU/NGL) [*SOCDEM odmítla podporu Levice pro eurovolby* 2023]. In contrast, SOCDEM signed an agreement on electoral cooperation and a joint candidates list with Budoucnost (the Future movement), which can be characterised as a liberal social left [*Sociální demokracie a Budoucnost budou v evropských volbách kandidovat společně 2024*]. SOCDEM entered the campaign with an official programme document entitled “It Is Right Time to Return Europe to the People”. In his opening speech, leader Lubomír Zaorálek points out, among other things, that “the European Union is failing too. The voice of the biggest companies and the richest individuals has the upper hand in the EU today”. He emphasises that a vote for social democracy is a vote for the European Union as a guarantee of stability and security and stresses that “Europe can help the Czech people”. The programme document is also used, especially in the introduction, to criticise and define itself against the current Czech government of Petr Fiala. The programme is subsequently drawn up from 23 programme theses, which are accompanied by a brief characterisation [*Program pro Evropské volby* 2024]. The individual programme theses are:

1. The EU must be strong and speak with one voice to ensure its citizens' security, economic prosperity and a healthy environment.
2. The EU must work for affordable energy for all and better regulate the energy market.
3. To keep the EU together, it is essential to finally start a real convergence of economic levels between old and new Member States.
4. The EU must be a pillar of social reconciliation in Europe.
5. The EU must look after people of all ages.
6. There must be fair pay for work.
7. We want a Europe that promotes a level playing field in education for all, regardless of financial background, origin or health status.
8. We want to make public transport in the EU more affordable.
9. The EU must ensure affordable food and fight against monopolies in the food industry.
10. We will present a European plan for affordable housing that will change state aid rules to allow national and local authorities to invest more in public housing.
11. In the EU, we will work to strengthen cooperation in the health sector so that there is no shortage of essential medicines in any Member State, as has happened in the Czech Republic in recent years.
12. The EU must be a community based on consensus-building, respect for different views and national differences.
13. The EU must make multinational capital pay fair taxes.
14. We will enforce fair taxation on greed.
15. We must stop tax avoidance by harmonising corporate tax bases, where companies use different EU laws to minimise their taxes.
16. The EU must develop a European rescue framework to protect companies from unfair foreign competition.
17. The EU needs strong investment in new technologies, in the circular economy and in more traditional sectors such as social and health care, transport and housing repairs.
18. We will ensure that the green transformation is socially just, helping the middle class and society as a whole, paying particular attention to the impact on low-income groups and on small and medium-sized enterprises.
19. We will fight for an increase in funding for the new European Social Climate Fund.
20. We will fight for the adaptation of European law so that the EU and the Member States have stronger tools to strengthen competition by breaking up cartels and oligopolies.
21. We need to strengthen strategic autonomy.
22. The EU must increase its initiative in diplomacy, peace and development policy.
23. The EU must be transparent and fair and serve the people.

In terms of content, 5 main narratives can be identified in these theses: the call for EU unity, social policy, environmental policy, the economy, foreign policy and security. The individual points could contain one or be a combination of the two identified narratives. Appeal for unity is included in 7 items, social policy is included in 11 items, economy is included in 6 items, environmental policy is included in 4 items, foreign policy and security is included in 2 items. The programme does not contain theses representing the dimension of ideological conflict and does not directly articulate the notion of sovereignty or the defence of nation-state interests. In terms of emotional context, all the programme theses give the impression of a constructive approach in an attempt to adjust EU legislation and do not contain negative language against the EU, a narrative of opposition or excessive criticism of the EU as well as do not portray the EU as a threat.

The political party Smer-SD has published its official programme document for the elections to the European Parliament on 15 May 2024. Entitled “For Peace in Europe!” in the introduction it mentions “5 fundamental truths”, which are the value-ideological basis of the program in which, in addition to the protection of sovereignty and national interests of Slovakia, it talks about the fight with “Brussels warmongers” or the goal of defeating the Progressive Slovakia party with the justification that “progressivism is an extreme and anti-Slovak ideology, which we must defeat”. The party’s programme contains 10 main points, which are subsequently explained at greater length [*Za mier v Európe! 2024*]. The main points are:

1. We are for peace, against war and its support in all its forms.
2. We are for the preservation of the right of veto and against the loss of sovereignty of Slovakia.
3. We are against the forced allocation of migrants.
4. Discrimination against our farmers must end.
5. We oppose extreme progressivist ideologies.
6. Nature protection must not come at the expense of living standards.
7. We are in favour of a social justice in Europe.
8. We are against discrimination against Slovak consumers.
9. We are for a safe and self-sufficient Europe.
10. We are against the domination of “elites”.

In terms of content, the 4 agenda items contain within them a thematic narrative of foreign policy and security, 2 of social policy, 2 of economics, 1 of environmental policy and 1 of ideological conflict. In terms of emotional context, every single agenda item contains an imperative of rejection or protest. The programme thus has the character of a resistance manifesto and positions the Smer-SD party in the position of an actor protecting Slovakia from the potentially dangerous policies of the European Union itself. The term “reject” itself appears 20 times in the programme theses texts, the term “oppose” 13 times.

The Hlas-SD party has not presented any official programme document for the European Parliament elections. On its official website, in the section devoted to the

EP elections and presenting the candidate list, it only published a passage entitled “We will not allow Slovakia to be hurt anymore”. The passage is devoted exclusively to harsh criticism of the Green Deal, pointing out the increased financial costs involved in building a house in accordance with the Green Deal requirements compared with building without those requirements. At the very end, it also mentions the “Threats of the Green Deal”, such as “the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars will affect more than 1,600,000 Slovaks, the ban on gas boilers means a further increase in housing costs, the mandatory insulation of homes leads to further indebtedness of families”. As the last threat associated with the Green Deal, he cites “the cost of €1 600 per month for each illegal migrant that Slovakia not accept” [*Nedovolíme už dalej ubližovať Slovensku 2024*]. This nonsensical conflation of unrelated agendas thus illustrates the party’s approach to preparing a professional programme document for the election.

WHAT UNITES AND WHAT DIVIDES

A strongly resonating campaign theme in the European elections across Europe is green transformation and the Green Deal. In the context of the Czech Social Democracy, it is interesting to note that it does not mention the Green Deal even once in its programme document, preferring to use the term “green transformation”. In its communication on Facebook, it works more intensively with the Green Deal. It states that the Green Deal is “badly set up” [Facebook: *Sociální demokracie 2024a*] and SOCDEM is assurance that Green Deal “will not harm our citizens” [Facebook: *Sociální demokracie 2024b*]. Points out that thanks to the Green Deal “billions have flowed to big banks and corporations” and that the party must fight “against the injustices of the Green Deal” [Facebook: *Sociální demokracie 2024c*]. In one status, it even refers to the Green Deal as “senseless madness” [Facebook: *Sociální demokracie 2024d*]. More moderate rhetoric is used in the official programme document. It says that the party will ensure that the green transformation is socially just, and also talks about special attention to impacts on low-income groups or avoiding energy poverty. It calls for action to tackle the climate crisis, but this must not lead to the impoverishment of Europe’s citizens. It calls for an increase in the EU’s Social Climate Fund and its stricter rules. On climate change, it speaks of its social dimension, namely that “this change is being caused by the richest at the expense of the most vulnerable, who will feel its consequences the most”, and stresses the need to protect people from the effects of the climate crisis. Thus, in program document The Green Deal and environmental policy were thus addressed in the programme mainly through its social dimension.

In its programme, the Smer-SD party describes the Green Deal as an “extreme environmental initiative”. It insists that it is in favour of environmental protection, but that this protection must not have an impact on the living standards of the

population, and therefore proposes a re-examination of the European Green Deal, a change to the Fit for 55 package and a legal commitment to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030. The Green Deal did not play such a prominent role in the Facebook communication. Occasionally in general communication the Green Deal was referred to as an example of “progressive ideology and the denial of traditional values” and was thus used more in the context of ideological demarcation against progressivism [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024a]. The topic of the Green Deal itself was articulated in particular by MEP Katarína Roth-Neved'álová, who described the Green Deal as “nonsense” and contrasted it with Slovakia’s food self-sufficiency [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024b]. Thus, the Green Deal was not one of the central themes of the Smer-SD campaign. Environmental policy is also addressed in a point of the programme document thesis entitled “Discrimination against our farmers must end”, in which the party rejects the administrative obstacles that the EU imposes on Slovak farmers and food producers in the form of emission and similar limits. It purposely portrays the EU as an entity that “discriminates” against the Slovak Republic. Candidate Katarína Roth-Neved'álová vulgarises this EU policy with the status: “Today, however, the EU wants to determine how much cow farts are allowed and how many migrants we should take home” [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024c]. The party adds that the priority will be to “review the Common Agricultural Policy Reform Agreement and related regulations so that they do not bring unreasonable restrictions and increased burdens on the agricultural sector. In doing so, we will pay particular attention to eliminating the negative impacts of the so-called Green Deal on agriculture”. At this point in the programme, it also mentions Ukraine, rejecting “the uncontrolled inflow of agricultural products from Ukraine, which is seriously harming our producers”, and adds that “aid to Ukraine and other countries must not come at the price of destroying our own farmers”, effectively placing the issue in a foreign policy context and linking it to other points in its programme, where it rejects the EU’s pro-Ukrainian policies.

However, in the case of Hlas-SD, we can talk about the Green Deal as one of the main topics of the campaign. The party does not offer an official programme document, but on its website dedicated to the European elections it offered the slogan “We will not allow Slovakia to be hurt anymore” and in the texts underneath it focused on pointing out the possible negative consequences of this initiative. Candidate leader Branislav Becík created a series of videos in which the Green Deal was his central theme, describing it as “liberal green madness”, “a shred of devastating rules”, or the result of “progressive green brain haze” [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024a]. According to his videos, the EU’s environmental regulations by “green liberal lunatics from Brussels” could lead, among other things, to the demolition of parents’ houses [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024b], to pensioners having to throw away gas boilers and elaborate complex projects as well as to citizens being forced to “bake bread only from contaminated Ukrainian wheat” as the Green Deal will bury Slovak agriculture and, if it is not stopped, we will only be able to build “golf courses for liberal prominents” on Slovak fertile soils [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024c]. In most of his speeches he stressed the need to vote for

people with “common peasant sense”. The absolute highlight of the Hlas-SD leader’s campaign was the tearing up of the European Union flag in protest against a possible ban on gas boilers [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024d]. He framed the Green Deal as part of the ideological battle in the EU. The theme was also used in the communication by candidate Loretta Pinke, who said that Brussels “is going to enslave us with their famous Green Deal”, talking about “dictated solutions from the green table”, which the Slovaks will pay the price for [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024e]. The issue of the Green Deal thus played a significant role in the party’s campaign, was strongly articulated by the leader of the candidate and presented as an ideological threat to the Slovak Republic. In the context of environmental policy, the issue of electromobility and agriculture resonated marginally in the party’s campaign. The ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars was described as nonsense by the party’s representatives. In the campaign, the leader of the candidate Branislav Becík asks the question what people will drive, adding that “rich liberal MPs are not interested, as they have money for an overpriced electric car”. He ends his reflection by saying “let the liberals drive whatever they want, we normal people want to have a choice!” [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024f]. At the same time, according to the party representatives, CO₂ reduction regulations will “destroy Slovak livestock farms” and damage Slovak agriculture.

The Slovak social democratic parties strongly articulated the topic of foreign policy and security in their programmes. The title of the Smer-SD’s programme document “We Are for Peace in Europe!” directly referred to this issue. In the very first point, it emphasises a “realistic approach” and an orientation “towards all four corners of the world”, which is also the official foreign policy doctrine of the Robert Fico government. The party’s programme speaks of “rejecting a mentoring approach” towards the People’s Republic of China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam, thereby de facto criticising the EU’s normative approach, manifested, for example, in criticism of the human rights situation in mentioned states of the world. In this way, Slovak Social Democracy puts a pragmatic *realpolitik* approach and economic interests above the issue of protecting human rights and political freedoms in the world. In this context, it also criticises the EU’s sanctions policy. Interestingly, on the point of rejecting sanctions, the party’s programme also states that it will strongly defend the right of citizens to cash payments and will not support any projects that threaten this right, which is probably a reaction to the agenda of the so-called digital euro. In the context of foreign policy, one of Smer-SD’s central narratives has been that it is “for the preservation of veto power and against the loss of Slovakia’s sovereignty.” The programme states that the existence of veto power does not work for big states. It also rejects considerations of activating the so-called *passerelle*, i.e. procedures allowing the withdrawal of the veto without changing the treaties. On this point, the party puts forward the nationalist thesis “We are patriots, and our most important value is national sovereignty and the protection of the Slovak Republic”.

The most important topic for the Smer-SD party in the campaign was the war in Ukraine. The word “peace” was a significant slogan of the party’s campaign. Right

at the opening point of the programme, it states that it is “a party of peace” for which the peaceful resolution of the conflict is a priority. It interprets military aid to Ukraine as “feeding and prolonging the conflict”. Peace was the main slogan of the billboard campaign and of the social media communication. Anyone who supports military aid to Ukraine is labelled as “a warmonger” in their communications. The party’s narratives are summarised by party MP Richard Glück in a video on the party’s official profile published at the prime time of the campaign, where he refers to Robert Fico as one of the “main representatives of peace in Europe”. He recalls that in 1998 the Slovak right-wing government allowed NATO fighter jets to fly over for the bombing of Belgrade, talks about the war rhetoric of the French president, the militant statements of the Polish government. He stresses that Slovakia has nothing to do with the war in Ukraine and asks “are we all so bored in the European Union that we are all just missing war for happiness? Let us finally talk about peace. Let us push both sides to the negotiating table and let us not put all our energy into wars and the killing of Slavs”. He refers to the “brutal business” for Western and American arms companies and does not forget to mention the “neo-Nazi Azov regiment”. He adds that “hatred of Russians legitimises neo-Nazism throughout the West”. He concludes by guaranteeing that the party will prevent Slovak men from going to fight in Ukraine and will “resist the West’s crazy military ideas” in the European Parliament [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024d].

Under the theme of foreign policy and security, we have also included the topic of migration in the analysis. In its programme, the Smer-SD party makes a specific point of opposing the forced relocation of migrants. It promotes the principle that illegal migration must be dealt within the countries in which it originates and criticises the EU for having done very little in 10 years to deal with this problem. An interesting remark on the subject was made by candidate Katarína Roth-Neved'álová, who said that the migration pact should include the reception of Ukrainians [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024e] while MP Tibor Gašpar described compulsory solidarity within EU countries as an “experiment by liberals and progressive extremists” [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024f].

Just as for Smer-SD the key slogan of the campaign was “peace”, for the Hlas-SD it was “sovereignty”. The party’s communication was about Slovakia’s chance to gain a “sovereign and pro-national voice” by its election, that Slovakia must preserve its “sovereign positions”, that as a “sovereign state” it has the right to speak about the direction of the common European ship, that it will fight for a “strong and sovereign country”. Also insists that Slovakia should be represented by politicians who “have the national interest as top priority”. The Social Democratic Party’s primary emphasis on sovereignty and the nation-state interest thus looks interesting from a political science perspective. The party’s communications also emphasised the need to protect the veto power and the need for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, but with less intensity than the Smer-SD party. Only in one post candidate Branislav Ondruš devote more space to the war in Ukraine, saying that the EU should become a “peacemaker” and not a “warmonger and perpetrator of the war in Ukraine”. He speaks of a “purposed international policy motivated against Russia” and contrasts it

with a policy that is about people's good. He points to the difference between "Ukraine" and "Ukrainians", The question, in his view, is whether Ukrainians want to fight. He argues that most Ukrainians today do not want to fight. He refers to a survey "recently conducted by Ukrainian sociologists in Ukraine", according to which less than 10% of the Ukrainian population support the continuation of the military conflict. He did not provide a source or further information on this survey. Also talk about the current policies of the Ukrainian government seeking to apply conscription. He says that expelling Ukrainians from Ukrainian territory and forcing them to leave country because they voluntarily refused to join the conflict is a "manifestation of hyenism". He defends Ukrainians who do not want to go back and fight. From this he derives the will of the Ukrainians for peace, which, in his view, neither the political leadership of Ukraine nor the political leadership of the EU has [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024g].

In the context of migration, the party's communications have spoken out strongly against forced relocation of migrants and warned against fines for not accepting migrants. Party chairman and Interior Minister Matúš Šutaj-Eštok pointed to migration as a topic for the European elections, saying that Slovakia will elect people for whom "the Slovak national interest will come first, or people who, because of their liberal and progressive agenda, will do anything that will do real harm to Slovakia" [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024h]. The leader of the candidate list Branislav Becík warns of "dictate of Brussels" and a fine of EUR 20,000 for each unaccepted migrant, and candidate Ján Ferenčák in his status even presented a dilemma between the fact that paying an EU fine for one unaccepted migrant is equivalent to feeding a family of four people for 5 years [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024i].

The Czech SODEM does not pay special attention to foreign policy in its programme. A significant line that runs through several points of the programme is the call for cooperation and internal unity of the European Union. The search for common solutions within the EU is presented as an effective tool for ensuring prosperity and security for citizens. It advocates the search for common policies in the areas of health, the economy, tax policy and the fight against monopolies. The programme talks about the need to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy, arguing that EU security must not rely solely on the transatlantic partnership. It therefore calls for "maintaining the strategic production of steel and other components essential for the defence industry". points to the need to diversify partnerships and seek new alliances. Unlike Smer-SD, in this context it does not speak of a policy "to all four global corners" but emphasising the role of the Global South. However, programme document does not name any specific states. At the same time, it talks about the need to increase the initiative in peace diplomacy, peace and development policy, where "the EU must play a stronger role in finding peaceful solutions, preventing conflicts, engaging with the causes and impacts of the climate crisis". Interestingly, it did not explicitly mention the war in Ukraine. In this part of the programme party also mentions migration. Unlike the Slovak entities, which frame migration as a security threat and point to mandatory quotas and fines from the European Union, Czech's

SOCDEM's programme states that the main emphasis will be on the integration of immigrants. It calls for the Member States to have the final word on this issue, in which it shares the position of the Slovak parties. It concludes by addressing the social status of migrants, stating that "the EU must prevent the exploitation of cheap migrant labour within the European market". In the Facebook communication, the party did not pay attention to the issue of migration.

An important dimension in the campaign of both Slovak social democratic subjects was the topic of ideological conflict. Both parties used the same narrative of the fight against liberalism and progressivism in the campaign, which also served them in the context of the internal political struggle and defining themselves against their main political competitor, the Progressive Slovakia party. Both Smer-SD and Hlas-SD also interpreted the European Parliament elections as an ideological struggle, and this dimension of the ideological conflict was also incorporated into the individual campaign themes. Smer-SD called one of the thesis of its programme document "We are against extreme progressivist ideologies". In this point, the party rejects the "forcible imposition of progressive gender ideology". Also speaks of the forcible imposition of progressive liberal policies under threat of sanctions and the interconnection between the using of EU funds and such ideologies. It speaks of protecting the "traditional family" of dad, mum and children and rejects adoption by homosexual couples. The programme talks about "absurd experiments with three toilets or multiple genders and sexes". In its communication, it contrasts "progressive ideology" with "traditional values". Smer-SD defines its fight against progressivism as a "standing up for sovereignty, peace, free speech, the rule of law, and Slovakia". Candidate Ľuboš Blaha states in one of his statuses that the representatives of Progressive Slovakia "behave like hyenas" and that "progressivism is evil" [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024g]. In one of his campaign videos he compared the candidate leader of the Progressive Slovakia Ľudovít Ódor to Hitler and spoke of "progressivist totalitarianism" [Facebook: Smer-SSD 2024h].

Resistance to liberalism and progressivism also characterised the campaign of the Hlas-SD party. The leader of the candidate list Branislav Becík said that the Hlas-SD "will replace the covering liberal politicians". As we noted in the section of the text dealing with the Green Deal, it was regularly labelled as an ideological tool of liberals and progressives. Most of the party's candidates have included an ideological dimension in their campaigns. Candidate Igor Šimko urged liberals to realise that there are also "normal people" living in Slovakia, framing liberalism as a kind of opposition to normality [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024j]. Candidate Loretta Pinke, when referring to the gender pay gap in the EU, criticised that "the main focus in the EU is on the discussion of 57 genders, LGBTI rights or toilets for the third gender" [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024k] and blamed the minimum-wage differences between EU countries on "liberal EU policies" [Facebook: Hlas-SD 2024l]. These examples illustrating how the notion of liberalism has been in the communication of the party representatives reduced to a kind of decadent and dangerous ideology.

Narrative of ideological conflict was not present in SOCDEM's program and communications. The only moment when an ideological demarcation was visible was a Facebook status with the text "Where does Social Democracy differ from conservative parties? You can't trade with nature, it has value in itself" [Facebook: Sociální demokracie 2024e]. Other explicit ideological labelling and definitions were not present in the communication. The ideological attribute was present in SOCDEM's focal themes. Most of the programme theses of the official programme document had an overlap with the field of social policy. It focused, among others, about affordable energy, convergence of economic levels in the EU, care for the elderly people, fair wages, access to education, affordable transport, food, housing, health care. The "fairness" imperative was applied by the party to the topics of wages, taxation and the green transformation. The party took a leftist approach to economic issues, speaking in its programme about the need to stand up to big corporations, the protection of consumers from the impact of emission permits, limiting the outflow of dividends outside the Czech Republic, the issue of workers' rights and minimum wages, the regulation of wages in corporations, and social housing. It placed great emphasis on greater taxation of multinational capital, excess profit taxes and, above all, the restriction of tax haven countries and the promotion of an anti-trust economy. The latter themes resonated more strongly in the party's Facebook communications.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the programme documents and pre-election communication of the examined political parties in relation to the theoretical framework of social democracy defined by Heywood revealed significant differences between the Czech SOCDEM and the Slovak parties Smer-SD and Hlas-SD. The Czech SOCDEM in its programme and communication corresponded strongly with the theoretical framework of social democracy. The party:

- accepted liberal-democratic principles and constitutional practices;
- recognised capitalism as a way of wealth creation, but stressed the need to regulate it;
- criticised the moral defects of capitalism (inequality);
- stressed the role of the state in correcting the defects of capitalism;
- worked with the concept of the nation-state within the EU.

In contrast, the Slovak parties Smer-SD and Hlas-SD deviated significantly from the theoretical framework of social democracy:

- they questioned liberal-democratic principles by presenting "liberalism" as a threat;
- they did not criticise capitalism from the position of social justice;
- did not emphasise the role of the state in the economic and social spheres;

- promote a nationalist vision of the sovereign state;
- oppose the EU.

While SOCDEM focused on traditional social democratic themes such as social justice and living standards, the Slovak parties articulated primarily nationalist and conservative themes, more significant for the politics of so-called national populism [Gyárfášová, Mesežníkov 2008]. Their programmes and communication were built on opposition to the EU, liberalism and progressivism. This points to the traditional problem of the establishment of the idea of liberalism in Slovak political thought [Gbúrová, Dobiaš 2014], as well as the continuation of illiberal populism [Sekerák 2020] in Slovak political left and raise the question of the relationship of Slovak left-wing political parties to conservatism or Christianity (on this topic in the context of the Polish more in Kancík-Kołtun et al. [2022]). The analysis shows that only the Czech SOCDEM significantly corresponded to the theoretical framework of social democracy. The Slovak parties, despite their formal subscription to social democracy, tended more towards nationalism and conservatism in their programmes and communication. This finding raises the question of how relevant it is to label the Slovak political parties analysed as social democratic, since in terms of their political programme and practice they only partially fulfil this ideological framework.

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**RÓŻNICE PROGRAMOWE MIĘDZY CZESKIMI I SŁOWACKIMI PARTIAMI
SOCJALDEMOKRATYCZNYMI W WYBORACH DO PARLAMENTU EUROPEJSKIEGO
W 2024 R.**

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje próbę identyfikacji głównych różnic programowych między socjaldemokratycznymi podmiotami politycznymi w Czechach i na Słowacji podczas wyborów do Parlamentu Europejskiego w 2024 roku. Ocenia on, w jakim stopniu dokumenty programowe i komunikaty przedwyborcze analizowanych partii politycznych: Sociální demokracie, Smer-SD i Hlas-SD były zgodne z fundamentalnymi zasadami ideologicznymi socjaldemokracji zdefiniowanymi przez Heywooda, a także ich zgodność z teoretycznymi ramami socjaldemokracji. Analiza treści pokazuje, że czeski podmiot przestrzega ideologicznych ram socjaldemokracji, podczas gdy słowackie podmioty prezentują tendencje nacjonalistyczne i konserwatywne. Rodzi to pytania o zasadność określania partii słowackich mianem socjaldemokratycznych, odzwierciedlając ich znaczne odstępstwo od tych ram ideologicznych pod względem programów i praktyk politycznych.

Slowa kluczowe: Parlament Europejski, Hlas-SD, Smer-SD, Czeska Partia Socjaldemokratyczna, socjaldemokracja

BIOGRAPHIES

Tomáš Dvorský is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. His research focuses on international relations and foreign policy issues. As a researcher, he has participated in scientific projects focusing on disinformation and conspiracy theories, as well as political awareness and political extremism among youth. He is author of the monograph entitled *Chinese Soft Power and the Slovak Experience* in which analysed Chinese influence in the environment of Slovakia and Central Europe. He has published on the topics of foreign policy and international relations in publications home and abroad. E-mail: tomas.dvorsky@upjs.sk

Gabriel Eštok is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice. His scientific and pedagogical focus is mainly on the functioning of political systems, democracy, regional integration processes, Euroscepticism, international relations and geopolitics. In addition to participating in several scientific projects, he was also the leader of the successful grant project VVGS-2014-214 Electoral Census in the 21st Century and the leader of the successful grant project KEGA 014UPJŠ-4/2020 Innovative Model of Education Leading to Active Citizenship as a Prevention of the Rise of Political Extremism among Students. He has extensive experience in several research projects. E-mail: gabriel.estok@upjs.sk