

Notable Presidential Elections of 1999 and 2019 in the Slovak Republic: Communicative Markers and Electoral Cleavages

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Abstract: The present-day Slovak Republic has overcome two systemic political polarizations, ‘Mečiarism – anti-Mečiarism’ and ‘Fico – anti-Fico’, that further determined the format of political confrontation in the elections. The degree of crisis in Slovak politics, as well as a level of trust in politicians, shaped the voters’ electoral preferences. In the Slovak electoral field, the national dimension of politics is predominant (in both parliamentary and presidential elections), while regional and ‘European’ elections are, in essence, second-order elections. The 1999 and 2019 presidential elections had specific communicative markers that determined the communicative strategy behind each candidate’s electoral campaign, along with the choice of a leadership pattern. In 1999, the Slovak electorate fragmented on the principle of popular populism vs Euro-Atlantic integration, whereas in 2019, a confrontation between social populism and progressive liberalism was the main driving force behind the fragmentation. A political confrontation between a conservative Vladimír Mečiar and a potential reformer Rudolf Schuster in 1999 was highly antagonistic, resulting in the country’s conventional electoral division into north and south by the region. The 2019 presidential elections took place under the confrontation between a systemic, albeit nominally independent, candidate Maroš Šefčovič and non-systemic Zuzana Čaputová (electoral cleavage ‘west versus east’).

Keywords: Slovak Republic, turnout, communicative markers, electoral fragmentation

INTRODUCTION

The Slovak Republic is one of the countries that, over the past few decades, have successfully overcome the post-socialist reality, and

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joined the cohort of new national democracies. A troublesome path of institutional change has marked the political system with significant political confrontations. The fine lines of political cleavages were emerging, reflecting the endeavour of conservative adherents of post-socialism with reformers (supporters of European integration), and populist Eurosceptics with progressive Euro-optimists. Each cleavage was becoming utterly pronounced during the election campaigns, especially in the elections of the President of the Slovak Republic.

The Slovak political establishment has always been apt to ‘personification’, or identification of a particular politician not only with the state ideology but with a certain model of ruling the country. In this light, we should define the main communicative markers that are illustrative of the hallmark election campaigns. Each marker could either unify the Slovak electorate or, on the contrary, deepen electoral cleavages in different regions of the country. However, we should not identify communicative markers only with electoral campaign slogans or political slogans. Each marker represents the entire image of a politician (more precisely, their behaviour) and addresses different groups of the electorate. The Slovak electorate is composed of both supporters and opponents of conservatism, Eurointegrators or Eurosceptics, occasional followers of populists, and others. All the core features of the Slovak electoral field best manifested themselves during the peak of political cleavages in the country, when the ‘personalized’ 1999 and 2019 presidential elections took place. The Slovak Republic has endured major political cleavages at 20 years’ intervals, namely ‘Mečiarism – anti-Mečiarism’ and ‘Fico – anti-Fico’ (Haydanka 2021b).

Recently, Slovak presidential elections have been around these two major cleavages. Each election is peculiar yet momentous since each candidate translated these cleavages to the Slovak electorate.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

According to the research problematics, the media sources (newspapers, Internet sources, official sites of the political parties) served as the illustrative material for the present study. These data enabled us to disclose the overall election strategy of candidates for president in the 1999 and 2019 elections, as well as a level of electoral support for each presidential candidate in the second round. In terms of research methodology, we have employed the methodological array of the content analysis that lies in determining the markers of the key

electoral communication strategy, i.e., the communicative indicators of political cleavage between the two principal candidates on the eve of the final voting. During the political struggle, each candidate resorted to a certain political communicative strategy. These are the official lines and messages of political solicitation, traced in the speeches of each candidate, enabling us to analyse the political forces behind the candidates, a level of candidate's independence, as well as their affiliation to conservative or liberal ideologies. The notion of communicative markers in different electoral cycles is widely discussed both in political linguistics and pragmatics (Mazzoleni 1995; Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2018; Furko 2017; McNair 2018), and in modern comparative political science, or more precisely, electoral engineering (Duch & Palmer 2001; Tucker 2002; Norris 2004; Eibl & Gregor 2019; Tambe 2021). It was important to assemble the existing research theories (Krivý, Feglová & Balko 1996; Školkay 2004; Szabó & Tátrai 2016; Plešivčák 2011, 2017; Martinkovič 2016) and project them at the study of the peculiarities of electoral communicative markers and electoral cleavages in the election of the President of Slovakia.

The determined communicative markers were the consequence of major political cleavages in Slovak society. Therefore, we cannot avoid drawing analogies with the theory of socio-political cleavages, proposed by Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). Further on, this concept was revisited and reconsidered (Elff 2007) and complemented by post-socialist specifics (Whitefield 2002; Bakke & Sitter 2013; Rommele, Lawson & Karasimeonov 1999). The outlined political cleavages in modern Slovakia ('Mečiarism – anti-Mečiarism' and 'Fico – anti-Fico') account for our referring to these two presidential elections as notable. From our perspective, for the transitive Slovak Republic, these are the two biggest political cleavages. In this light, Slovaks had to make a fateful choice between the post-socialist model or Euro-Atlantic integration in 1999, and the 'firm hand policy' and the 'new faces in politics' in 2019.

The outlined methodology conditioned a set of research tasks to complete. Firstly, we are to identify the main communicative markers in the 1999 presidential election (a confrontation between V. Mečiar and R. Schuster) through the 'Mečiarism – anti-Mečiarism' and 'Fico – anti-Fico' cleavage. Also, we endeavour to confirm or dispute the existence of electoral cleavages between the north and south, as well as east and west of Slovakia.

Secondly, we attempted to explain the main three communicative markers in the 2019 presidential election. The political fight between Z. Čaputová and M. Šefčovič followed the principles of the ‘Fico – anti-Fico’ cleavage. Therefore, similarly to our 1999 elections’ study, we sought to validate or refute the main electoral cleavages at the regional level.

It is worth mentioning that we have previously given a deeper insight into the stated research problematics of the Slovak presidential elections (Haydanka 2021a). We have identified electoral markers and cleavages in all presidential elections held by popular vote, from the very first election in 1998, up to the most recent presidential election in 2019.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1999 Presidential Election

The struggle between two candidates Rudolf Schuster and Vladimír Mečiar became a recognizable electoral confrontation. It is worth mentioning that in the 1999 presidential elections the turnout proved truly atypical, for only a quarter of voters did not come to polling stations. Firstly, the fact that it was the first national election of the head of state significantly revved up the electoral interest of the Slovak population. Also, voting for a particular politician, not for the political ideology (party), increased the involvement of the Slovak voter (personification of politics). Secondly, a political confrontation within the country¹, that did not draw to a close after the 1998 parliamentary elections², contributed to the popularity of the 1999 presidential election. The matter is that the presidential election was the climax of a political struggle between Vladimír Mečiar and the poly-ideological anti-Mechiar coalition in the National Council.

Based on our research findings, we can point the following three communicative markers, characterizing the 1999 presidential election: *‘Free Ivan Lexa’ – ‘Three for One for the Sake of Slovakia’ – ‘All Democrats against Meciar’*.

¹ In terms of the growing crisis in the political system and the need to combat the previous political elite, the 1999 presidential election is similar to the first parliamentary and recent elections to the National Council (1990, 1992, and 2020).

² The turnout of 84,24% in the previous parliamentary elections in 1998 serves as a confirmation of the importance of the Slovak voter participation in resolving the confrontation between supporters and opponents of conservative policies Vladimír Mečiar. As a result, Mečiar’s HZDS ‘lost by winning’ because they failed to win a majority in National Council, despite the actual victory in the election.

The first communicative marker, *'Free Ivan Lexa'*, concerns Vladimír Mečiar, the most prominent Slovak politician of the early post-socialist period of the 1990s, and his motives for running in the 1999 elections. V. Mečiar, well known for his populist rhetoric³, recognised that liberating the former head of the Slovak Information Service Ivan Lexa was the main driving force behind his electoral campaign (Meliš 1999). I. Lexa remained one of the greatest political proponents of the conservative politician V. Mečiar. This marker considerably polarizes Slovak society and exacerbates the political struggle. In the rhetoric of V. Mečiar and his HZDS party associates, I. Lexa was unjustly imprisoned for their political animosity with the Democratic Coalition.

The second marker, *'Three for One for the Sake of Slovakia'*, emphasizes the factor of independent candidates and the impact of the public on political processes. It was a pre-election initiative to nominate one independent candidate among the following three: Magdaléna Vášáryová, Juraj Svec, and Michal Kováč. Of all the parliamentary political parties, KDH was the most supportive of this project. As a result, all three candidates registered in the elections, with M. Vášáryová (6,6%) (Voľba prezidenta 1999, 2021), gaining the largest support and eventually running third in the first round. This marker indicates the unlikelihood of a neutral 'third force' formation in the confrontation 'Mečiarism – anti-Mečiarism' (Leška 2013, 78).

The third marker, *'All Democrats against Mečiar'*, was not an official logo, yet played a decisive role in this election, being undercurrent in the entire electoral campaign. This marker has remained relevant even after last year's parliamentary elections. Rudolf Schuster, as an independent candidate, sought support from democratic political forces in the National Council (Kotian 2009). The designated marker obliquely concerns R. Schuster, but we can argue that he exemplified a true candidate the Slovaks expected, as opposed to V. Mečiar.

The victory of the non-partisan Rudolf Schuster (57,18%) in the second round of the election confirmed the political defeat of Vladimír Mečiar (42,81%) (Voľba prezidenta 1999, 2021) and the ultimate end of post-socialist politics. Another consequence of the 1999 election

³ From a wide range of V. Mečiar's allegations, for example, we can highlight the statement that populism is an effective political tool and one should not attribute any negative features to populism (Deegan-Krause 2012).

was the deepening of the Slovak Euro-Atlantic course with the support of the President-elect that wouldn't hinder rapprochement with Europe. After the milestone presidential election of 1999, the turnout, although declining, steadied. The presidential election is becoming of interest to almost every second voter.

Electoral cleavages in the 1999 presidential election

Following the 1999 presidential election, the situation with electoral cleavages became fairly ambiguous. The traditional cleavage between the west and the east of the country was getting more pronounced. A more conservative Eastern electorate supported Vladimír Mečiar whereas the more democratically oriented voters in the West supported Rudolf Schuster. For example, in the voting district of the capital Bratislava, R. Schuster secured an absolute majority in both rounds of voting: 50,17% – in the first round and 70,86% – in the second round. The support of V. Mečiar was considerably lower: 25% – in the first round and 29,12% – in the second round (Vol'ba prezidenta 1999, 2021). We can trace the general trends in the electoral preferences of Slovaks on the example of the results in the East Slovak city of *Prešov*. R. Schuster won the first round with 59,91%, while V. Mečiar received only 27,11% support. The second round displayed a similar political forces configuration: R. Schuster kept the championship (68,14%), with V. Mečiar running up (31,85%) (Ibid.). However, the situation was largely ambiguous. Firstly, Slovakia's second-largest city, *Košice*, located in the east of the country, supported 'its' candidate Rudolf Schuster, who ran in the presidential election as mayor of *Košice*. Not surprisingly, R. Schuster's support in *Košice* was 75% in the first round and 80% in the second round of voting (Ibid.). For these reasons, the city of *Košice* and the nearest voting districts do not look like typical East Slovak regions, but to a greater extent display electoral deviations. Secondly, in the East Slovak regions, the electoral choice differentiated considerably. For example, contrary to *Prešov*, one of the largest cities in the east of the country, V. Mečiar would receive an absolute majority of votes in the smaller towns of the far east. In the cities bordering on Ukraine, the majority supported V. Mečiar. In *Snina*, he received 51,31% in the first round and 56,82% in the second round. In *Sobrance*, he was supported by 50,91% in the first round and 57,49% in the second (Ibid.).

According to the 1999 election results, we did not confirm the 'east-west' electoral cleavage but we can argue that the 'north-south'

cleavage exists. In general, the decisive round of voting showed the electoral dominance of the independent candidate R. Schuster over the conservative V. Mečiar. The former won in six regions, while the latter only in two. In each region, the electoral gap was more or less noticeable. For example, the largest electoral distance was in the voting districts next to the modern *Bratislava* region, with R. Schuster defeating V. Mečiar by more than 31%. The smallest electoral gap was in the voting districts of the modern *Banská Bystrica* region where R. Schuster defeated his opponent by slightly over than 2%. Only in the two modern regions of the North (*Trenčín* and *Žilina*), did V. Mečiar become the winner. It might lead to a misconception that he completely lost to his competitor. However, the voting results in the second round deny it because 42,81% voted for V. Mečiar and 57,18% supported the winner R. Schuster (Ibid.). These were absolutely competitive candidates, supporting whom the Slovak voter chose the Mečiar model of national populism (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová 2008) or potential democratic changes that the former communist official was to implement (East & Thomas 2003, 466–467).

2019 Presidential Election

The recent presidential election occurred under ‘*Zuzana Čaputová vs Maroš Šefčovič*’ opposition. These presidential elections follow the path of the 2014 election, with the crisis of traditional politicians and the need for new faces in the highest state position. The murder of journalist Ján Kuciak led to the political crisis of 2018 (Cuprik, Kapitán & Filo 2018) and resulted in Robert Fico’s stepping from the post of the Prime Minister. Undoubtedly, on the eve of the presidential election, the level of electoral support for SMER-SD was critically low. Obvious was the victory of an alternative candidate, Zuzana Čaputová, a public activist, never accused of corruption. Notably, her main opponent was a well-known pro-European politician and diplomat, de-facto non-partisan Maroš Šefčovič. Interestingly, given the low pre-election ratings of the former hegemony Social Democrats, M. Šefčovič consciously distanced himself from party affiliation with SMER-SD, yet relying on their support during the election campaign (Šefčovič prijal ponuku Smeru 2019). Thus, the candidate confirmed that he is a nominee from the political environment of Robert Fico.

Based on our research findings, we can point the following groups of communicative markers, characterizing the 2019 presidential election:

'Fico – anti-Fico' – 'New President for Slovakia' / 'Let's face evil, together we can do it' – 'President for a strong Slovakia' / 'Forever for Slovakia'

The *'Fico – antiFico'* communicative marker is a socio-political cleavage rather than a communicative marker of the election campaign. The marker resulted from the deep political crisis that engulfed Slovakia after the assassination of journalist J. Kuciak. Political circles close to then-Prime Minister Robert Fico were accused of corruption and crime. The police investigation began in the country, unveiling various corruption schemes, facilitated by the 'loyalty' of the Government or particular high-ranking officials. Although the true results of investigative actions became obvious already in 2020 (Jaroslav Haščák po zatknutí a obvinení 2020). Respectively, there established a group of politicians who advocated a new corruption-free and progressive Slovak policy, bringing forward new independent politicians. Instead, those in favour of R. Fico could offer Slovaks social stability and preservation of traditional cultural values, this fact testifying to the significant influence of populism. Of course, the search for new anti-systemic faces in politics was as much a threat to populism as the presidential candidate Štefan Harabin's campaign promises to preserve traditional Slovak culture and family values (Mazák 2019). The victory of the populists led by Igor Matovic in the parliamentary elections in early 2020 only confirmed these threats.

Further on, we will discuss the two markers, combined in *Zuzana Čaputová's election program*. She was precisely the progressive candidate and the new face in Slovak politics who positioned herself as an alternative to traditional Slovak politicians. For a while, Z. Čaputová was a civil activist, carried out human rights activities and headed public organizations (Advokátka Zuzana Čaputová bude kandidovať 2018). Ms Z. Čaputová's political life was very short-lived and was associated with a new liberal political party 'Progressive Slovakia' (Progresívne Slovensko 2021), established in 2017. Z. Čaputová's political image was based on two main communicative markers. The first marker, *'The New President for Slovakia'*, emphasized that her being a new-generation politician, never involved with a conventional 'old' political elite, nor marred by corruption and endless scandals. In Slovak politics, Z. Čaputová was to become the new face (in this case the new President), capable of fighting the adverse phenomena in politics and consolidating Slovak society. The second communicative marker, *'Let's face evil, together we can do it'*,

addressed Z. Čaputová's supporters. It was a message to the electorate, defining the cleavage between the old and new authorities, identified as 'good vs evil'. To defeat 'wicked' politicians, this progressive candidate relied on society for help. Each proponent of Z. Čaputová had to become an indispensable, active part of the election process. The novelty of Čaputová's political image derived from the cultivation of the image of an active woman in big politics, which was untypical not only for Slovakia, but for most post-socialist countries.

The following markers constitute the *electoral communicative strategy* of another presidential candidate, Maroš Šefčovič. Both communicative markers are direct opposite to those of his closest competitor, Zuzana Čaputová. The cornerstone of Maroš Šefčovič's election campaign was securing stability and preservation of traditional Slovak cultural values. The first marker, '*President for a Strong Slovakia*', establishes M. Šefčovič as a guarantor of stability in times of deep political crisis. The communicative marker addresses a voter who is not supportive of social change but willing to retain the benefits (especially social) they had received during Robert Fico's premiership. In addition, there appears the image of a strong politician-diplomat, destined to lead the country. The second communicative marker, '*Forever for Slovakia*', emphasizes M. Šefčovič's willingness to enter into the presidency. The marker appeals to patriotic feelings and focuses on the more conservative electorate. Populistic self-sacrifice was another feature of this marker.

In the second round, Zuzana Čaputová won with 58,40% vs Maroš Šefčovič's 41,59% (Vol'ba prezidenta Slovenskej republiky 2019, 2021). The Slovaks believe that Slovakia's solving the long-running political crisis, as well as checks-and-balances-based constitutional interaction between the President and Parliament, that did not rely on political arrangements, contributed to this victory and allowed the country to show signs of political recovery. This can be exemplified by a minor influence of the new President's party 'Progressive Slovakia' in the 2020 parliamentary elections. In the coalition union, it received 0,04% votes fewer (6,96%) than required to get into the National Council. Therefore, paradoxically enough, the President does not have direct parliamentary support along the party lines, which significantly weakens her power.

Electoral cleavages in the 2019 presidential election

As a matter of course, we will attempt to point out geographically-determined electoral cleavages, such as north-south and east-west. Based on the election results, we can trace only one noticeable cleavage between the western and eastern regions. The *Prešov* region became the only region where Maroš Šefčovič won with 51,03%, while Zuzana Čaputová received some few per cent less (48,96%). In contrast, in the capital *Bratislava* region, Z. Čaputová was threefold ahead of M. Šefčovič: 73,74% versus 26,25%, respectively (Voľba prezidenta Slovenskej republiky 2019, 2021). Notably, one of the candidates unequivocally prevails at the extreme borders of the country. Some eastern areas (*Snina, Sobrance, Svidník, Medzilaborce*) showed unambiguous support of 67% for Maroš Šefčovič. The situation is quite the opposite in the extreme western regions of Slovakia (*Skalica, Malacky, Pezinok, Dunajská Streda*), where support for Zuzana Čaputová ranges from 66 to 83% (Voľba prezidenta Slovenskej republiky 2019, 2021).

The electoral map displays the dominance of Zuzana Čaputová, who wins in seven of the eight regions. The 16% difference in voter support should indicate the consistency of electoral preferences of the Slovak voter. We can distinguish three groups of regions (Ibid.):

(1) *highly heterogeneous regions* are those where the electoral gap between the candidates is multiple times higher in favour of Zuzana Čaputová (western *Bratislava* (73,74% vs 26,25%) and *Trnava* regions (65,68% vs 34,31%));

(2) *heterogeneous regions* are those with the significant electoral difference in favour of Z. Čaputová, ranging from 11 to 16% (western *Nitra* (58,06% vs 41,93%), central *Banská Bystrica* (55,51% vs 44,48%), and eastern *Košice* regions (58,42% vs 41,57%));

(3) *homogeneous regions* are those where the electoral difference between the candidates ranges from 1 to 3% (western *Trenčín* (51,69% vs 48,30% in favour of Z. Čaputová), northern *Žilina* (50,96% vs 49,04% also in favour of Z. Čaputová), and eastern *Prešov* regions (48,96% vs 51,03% in favour of M. Šefčovič)).

A thorough analysis demonstrates, that if had it been not for a complete failure of M. Šefčovič in the two western regions, voting in other regions proved quite homogenous. Therefore, in the 2019 elections, both candidates were competitive and the election campaign proved to be highly intense.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The first 1999 general elections of the President of the Slovak Republic occurred under the political cleavages '*Mečiarism – anti-Mečiarism*'. It was an intense confrontation between two candidates, one of whom professed national populism (V. Mečiar), and the other was entrusted with carrying out successful European integration reforms (R. Schuster). In the electoral campaign, there formed several communicative markers, confirming the populist nature of Vladimír Mečiar's rhetoric: accusations of opposition in political persecution, the impossibility to sacrifice their presidential ambitions and expressed in chaotic pre-election behaviour of three independent candidates, and cultivating political confrontation with V. Mečiar (rhetoric of R. Schuster, Mečiar's main rival). The results of the vote confirmed the electoral cleavage between north and south, contrary to a steady belief in a traditional cleavage between west and east. We should also take into account the East Slovak 'political roots' of Rudolf Schuster.

2. The latest presidential election took place in 2019, marked by a political cleavage '*Fico – antiFico*'. Twenty years after the 1999 elections, the Slovaks faced a fateful choice again. This time they were to choose between social populism, successfully exploited by Robert Fico since 2006 (this time it was the presidential candidate Maroš Šefčovič) and a non-systemic politician with a 'liberal-progressive' outlook (public activist Zuzana Čaputová). The political cleavage '*Fico – antiFico*' proved the most important communicative marker of the 2019 presidential election, i.e., the fight against authoritarian tendencies in the government and the new European perspective. Each candidate exploited different communicative markers. A group of two communicative markers, characteristic of Z. Čaputová, demonized the current government ('*Let's resist evil, together we can do it*') and emphasized the need for political innovation in modern Slovakia ('*New President for Slovakia*'). A group of communicative markers, identified with M. Šefčovič, testified to his self-sacrifice and high level of patriotism ('*Always for Slovakia*'), along with his antagonism with the female candidate ('*President for a Strong Slovakia*'). The election results partly proved the existence of the electoral cleavage between western and eastern regions, as M. Šefčovič failed as a presidential candidate in the western regions, while Z. Čaputová showed a low result in the eastern regions. Moreover, in the *Prešov* region, the first female president in Slovakia altogether lost.

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