

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN THE 2023 SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the role of emotions in election campaigns during the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia in 2023. The study focuses on the analysis of emotional strategies used by political parties to mobilize voters and create a strong emotional connection with their target groups. Emotions, such as fear, anger, hope and pride, played a key role in election campaigns, showing that emotional stimuli rather than rational arguments dominated political communication. The main objective is to define the emotions that dominated the election campaigns and assign them to political parties. The study uses a descriptive method, analysis and synthesis of knowledge to examine the role of emotions in the early parliamentary elections in 2023.

Keywords: *emotions, election campaigns, parliamentary elections 2023, political parties, emotional strategies*

Introduction

Although the analysis of voter behavior is given considerable attention in the Slovak Republic, especially in the period after the end of the elections as part of their evaluation, it is a topic that remains permanently relevant and inexhaustible. The political preferences of voters in Slovakia have undergone significant transformations since the establishment of an independent state, which are determined by historical, cultural, economic and social factors. The analysis of these changes allows not only to identify long-term trends in political attitudes, but also to forecast their further development.

In general, the objective of this article is to define the factors that influenced voter decisions in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia. Given the broad scope of this article, the main emphasis is placed exclusively on the emotional type of decision-making and the related search for an answer to the question of what role emotions played in voter behavior and in election campaigns in the early parliamentary elections.

In line with this objective, our ambition is to examine the following hypothesis: "*Voter behavior in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia was significantly determined by the media presentation of political parties, with emotions and themes related to societal polarization playing a more substantial role than rational arguments and the programmatic priorities of parties.*"

In order to reach conclusions and take a concrete position on the hypothesis, we will analyze the essence of the emotional strategies of political parties. Each of the parties used a

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combination of emotions and communication tools that addressed their target groups, and our goal will be to concretize these emotions and assign them to the political party.

To achieve the aim of the study and its purpose, we utilized the descriptive method, the method of analysis and synthesis of knowledge, and the comparative method. The dominant method is analysis, which aims to examine societal moods during the pre-election period of 2023, the nature of pre-election campaigns, and, through these, explain voter attitudes in the elections with a focus on emotional decision-making. The combination of these methods, along with logical structuring of the text, gradually leads toward fulfilling the goal of the contribution, thus confirming or, conversely, negating the established hypothesis.

Since the article analyzes the importance of emotions in the political sphere, we believe that it represents a suitable starting point for further empirical research on voting behavior, and we see its contribution in this. Given that individuals experience and express a wide range of emotions simultaneously in everyday life, it is crucial to examine their impact on political attitudes and decision-making. This issue opens up a vast space for further scientific research, with the concept of intersectionality of emotions deserving special attention. The analysis of the interconnection of various social identities, including race, class, gender and their relationship to emotional factors in political contexts is an area that requires deeper examination. At the same time, we note a deficit in the field of comparative international research that would allow us to identify differences in how emotions influence political behavior in different societies, cultural contexts, and political systems.

In order to reach comprehensive conclusions, we are also helped by the scientific works of experts who have devoted themselves to emotional decision-making. Emotional decision-making in politics can be considered an interdisciplinary topic, as it is the subject of research by experts from the fields of political science, psychology, neuroscience and sociology. This approach emphasizes that emotions play a key role in shaping political opinions and voters' decisions, often more than rational arguments. One of the pioneers in this field was **A. Damasio**, who in his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (2006) showed that emotions are essential for effective decision-making. His work in the field of neuroscience emphasizes that emotional centers of the brain cooperate with cognitive processes in processing complex information, which has a direct impact on political behavior. Another major contributor is **George E. Marcus**, who argues in his book *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (2002) that emotions can support democratic processes by enabling people to respond to new information and adjust their political positions. **Marcus**, along with **Michael B. Mackuen**, developed a theory of affective intelligence that explains how emotions such as anxiety or enthusiasm influence political behavior, especially voter mobilization.

Sociologist **A. Russell Hochschild**, in her book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016), examined how emotions such as anger and nostalgia shape the political views of conservative voters in the United States. Hochschild introduces the concept of "emotional narratives," which help individuals make sense of political and societal changes.

Psychologist **J. Haidt** argues in his book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012) that political decision-making is largely influenced by moral emotions that precede rational analysis. His work shows that people often first create an emotional response to political issues and then seek rational justification for their positions. In this context, it is worth mentioning the prominent French psychologist **G. Le Bon**, who is closely associated with the beginnings of political psychology. Le Bon was one of the first to point out that the masses of people actually desire a completely different leader than the one they declare on a conscious level. They do not seek intelligence, prudence or humility; completely different factors are decisive, which he presented in his work *The Psychology of Crowds* (2009). Furthermore, experts such as **D. Westen** in his book *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (2007) emphasize that successful political campaigns are those that appeal to the emotional core of voters. **Westen** argues that emotions such as hope, fear, or anger are more effective in gaining support than rational arguments. A significant contribution is also made by the studies of **J. S. Lerner**, who examines the influence of specific emotions such as fear and anger on political decision-making. Her research suggests that fear can lead to more cautious decisions, while anger supports faster and often more radical reactions.

From the domestic scene of political psychology, we can mention the psychologist **D. Fábik**, whose practice focuses on investigating the causes of human dissatisfaction. His goal is to reveal thoughts and experience emotions that the client is not aware of at the given moment, using a modified version of **Sigmund Freud's** classical psychoanalysis. "*The decision-making and election process, according to his knowledge, is predominantly emotional and often unconscious*" (Fábik, 2020). He also focuses on the mental processes by which voters decide who to vote for in elections.

The selection given by the author can in no way be considered exhaustive. The authors present a representative sample that forms the basis for the theoretical starting points.

1. The theoretical dimension of behavioral political science in the context of the politics of emotions

Voter behavior is one of the key areas of study within political science and the social sciences, and understanding it is crucial for the effective development of behavioral political science. Behavioral political science plays a key role in the study of voting behavior because it focuses on understanding individual and group decisions in a political context. This approach analyzes why voters make certain decisions, what factors influence their choices, and what patterns can be observed in voter behavior during electoral processes. One of the main contributions of behavioral political science is its emphasis on empirical research. Through public opinion polls, experiments, and statistical analysis, it can identify the main motivations that lead voters to prefer specific political parties or candidates. It can examine how social factors such as education, income, or age shape voting decisions. It also focuses on psychological aspects such as values, attitudes, and emotions that can play a significant role in individuals' political orientation.

Behavioral political science also studies how media campaigns, political propaganda, or the economic situation influence voter behavior. Research in this area shows that voting behavior is not only the result of rational decisions, but is often influenced by emotional and cognitive processes. Phenomena such as the "bandwagon" effect (following the majority) or the "underdog" effect (supporting outsiders) are frequent topics of behavioral analysis (Kováčová N., 2021).

Another important aspect is the study of political participation. Behavioral political science analyzes why some voters regularly participate in elections, while others decide not to vote. Factors such as political commitment, trust in the political system, or the perception of the effectiveness of the voter's votes are decisive. Behavioral political science offers a framework and methods for the systematic study of voting behavior, thereby helping to uncover important mechanisms that influence political decision-making. On the other hand, the analysis of voting behavior provides concrete data that enrich the theoretical concepts and models of behavioral political science. This relationship thus allows for a better understanding of political dynamics and their application to improve electoral processes and the political system as a whole.

Political communication and the role of information flows are also an important area of interest. Behavioral political science deals with how voters process information from the media, what role fake news and disinformation play, or how different forms of framing influence their decisions.

Within the framework of behavioral political science analyses, the study of emotions in politics is becoming an attractive topic. Emotions such as fear, anger, or enthusiasm have a strong influence on how voters react to political events and campaigns. For example, fear-based campaigns can mobilize voters to support security-oriented policies, while positive emotions can strengthen identification with a candidate or party (Ďurek, 2011). Behavioral political science also has practical implications. Political strategists and advisors use knowledge from this area to optimize campaigns, target advertisements, and create political strategies. In addition, it can contribute to the creation of public policies that better reflect the needs of citizens and support their participation in democratic processes.

Reason and emotion naturally intertwine in politics. As the founder of elite theory, **V. Pareto**, emphasized more than a century ago, reason shows us the way from point A to point B, but it does not decide whether point B is our desired goal. The desire for point B is inevitable, otherwise we would not have set out on this journey ourselves (Frič, 2021). However, the above principle does not apply only to political marketing, which helps politicians win elections by stimulating emotions and working with the subconscious desires of voters. The politics of emotions in a democracy does not only consist of the ability of leaders to reveal the desires of citizens and lure them with promises. Its true mission is to awaken a passion for active citizenship, to inspire people to desire freedom, justice, the rule of law, tolerance and other civic values.

Emotion based politics stands in contrast to routine, technocratic "quid pro quo" politics, which prioritizes cold rationality, an administrative approach, and an impersonal tone over a visionary future and charismatic leadership. It is based on the knowledge that individuals feel the need to share their emotions with political leaders. They desire to satisfy their emotional needs, to

express them publicly and to gain recognition and legitimacy for these feelings. Political actors specifically focus on this aspect of emotional interaction. However, in the past, many politicians primarily perceived this dimension of politics as a form of entertainment. However, reducing politics to entertainment fails to adequately respond to the deeper emotional needs of citizens, especially in times of crisis, such as economic recession. During such periods, more profound political emotions come to the forefront, including national pride, concerns about the future, solidarity, and the strengthening of civic confidence. These emotions require political leaders to engage in deeper reflection and to mobilize citizens based on values and social engagement rather than superficial entertainment.

Decision-making in elections is a predominantly emotional and often unconscious process. Even though some political parties offer valuable programs and goals, these are ultimately of secondary importance. Every voter has a certain unconscious need that influences how they perceive all other information about the party or politician. For example, if a voter has a strong need for self-esteem, they will be attracted to a politician emphasizing the beauty and strength of the country. On the contrary, if a voter experiences aggression or anger, they will prefer the party that best represents these emotions. If a voter develops a strong antipathy towards a political force, they will sympathize with the party that most intensely expresses resistance to it. Specific steps from the party's program thus play a secondary role. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the choice of a political party reflects an individual's attempt to fulfill their own, largely unconscious needs.

In politics, we can distinguish the following types of emotions (Fábik, 2020):

- *Positive emotions*: Politicians often use hope to mobilize voters and gain support for future plans, associating it with optimism, belief in change, and expectations of a better future. They frequently appeal to national or group identity to evoke pride in the country, culture, or past achievements. Positive campaigns, election victory celebrations, and public events can generate joy and encourage further civic participation.
- *Negative emotions*: Politicians often use fear to highlight economic, security or social threats and concerns about the future. Anger serves as a motivating force for action, such as protests or voting. Disgust, often triggered by corruption scandals, unethical behavior, or political immorality, can lead to public resentment toward the political system or specific individuals.
- *Mixed emotions*: Loyalty reflects attachment to a political party, ideology, or community and can be linked to a sense of devotion. Politicians strengthen pride by emphasizing national interests and cultural heritage. The "us versus them" mentality can provoke strong emotional reactions, including rejection or demonization of opponents.

According to **S. Kováčová**, *"there is also a significant group of so-called permanent, loyal voters in society who prefer a true expression of their identity, faith, and ideology and will therefore resort to honest voting even at the cost that their sympathizer has no real chance of succeeding in a competitive environment. With their decision, they consciously deviate from*

tactical voting, because if they succumbed to it, they would deny their identity." Emotions take a back seat in this decision-making (Kováčová, S., 2021,p.37).

Research shows that during times of crisis, populist leaders become the most prominent figures in the politics of emotions. The emotional politics that populists use has a dual nature. The first aspect is the creation of a harmonious emotional connection between them and the so-called "ordinary people," emphasizing their shared identity and interests. The second aspect is the polarizing mobilization through the identification of a common enemy. This strategy oscillates between satisfying the emotional needs of voters and creating emotional alarmism based on fear, tension, and hatred. Populist emotional politics thus combines positive emotional alignment within the group with highly confrontational and negative emotions directed towards the identified opponents. In this way, populists effectively mobilize the masses and strengthen their political position.

Politicians have a significant influence on shaping public debate, and their words can directly impact the mood of society. Research shows that when a politician reacts emotionally, regardless of the quality of the arguments, they are perceived as a greater authority, exuding more dominance. Voters see them as bolder, more competent, and feel a greater affinity towards them. On the other hand, if a politician only points to facts, they may be viewed as more submissive and seen as a theorist detached from real life (Fábik, 2024). From a psychological perspective, the emotion of anger is more acceptable to voters because relieving oneself of responsibility and assigning blame to others is liberating and much simpler for improving life. "When it comes to anger that creates an image of an enemy, with malice, vengefulness, and similar traits, it is a serious problem that threatens the very foundations of democracy. The prominent American philosopher **M. C. Nussbaum** reminds us in her book *"The Monarchy of Fear"* that the ancient Greeks called such anger a poison for democracy (Nussbaum, 2018).

Anger and hatred have a relatively large power. Rudeness is currently being used as a tool of influence. Many politicians are aware that voters are frustrated and therefore use harsh techniques of verbal expression. Based on the above, we can conclude that voters are not interested in boring politicians, but rather in conflicted, eccentric personalities, which is a mirror of a polarized society and the dominance of emotions in voting behavior.

2. Emotions in the Political Sphere

In the context of behavioral political science, we have only briefly addressed emotions in politics, which is why we consider it important to deepen this issue, as the theoretical foundation serves as the starting point for examining the hypothesis.

Emotions play a key role in various aspects of political events, and their significance is increasingly growing in the decision-making process. **K. Gustafsson** and **T. H. Hall** define emotions as *"socially recognizable patterns of emotional responses and dispositions"* (Gustafsson, Hall, 2021, p. 974). They are the subject of growing international scientific interest

because they offer a unique perspective on the dynamics of political processes and interactions between states, institutions, and individuals. This increasing interest is driven by the ability of emotions to influence decision-making, public mobilization, and the legitimization of political actors. Emotions become collective through processes of representation, which include expressions, practices, and discourses. These representations are essential for understanding how emotions are formed in a political environment and how they affect political decisions. Emotions transcend individual experiences because they are comprehensible within a social context, where feelings such as anger, sadness, or fear are recognized. Every emotion has its own "logic" that determines "when, why," and how it is felt, as well as its associated consequences. Politics, therefore, is inseparably linked to human emotions. An example of this can be found in the passionate expressions of charismatic leaders or the reactions of citizens to significant events.

Emotions are a fundamental element of political events and are closely linked to political polarization (Webster, Albertson 2022). Understanding the relationship between emotions and politics is crucial for understanding the dynamics of contemporary societies. While emotions were often excluded in Western discourses in the past, they are now a legitimate subject of political studies (Beattie et al., 2019). Scientific works focus on how emotions influence political perception and behavior, as well as how political actors strategically manipulate emotions to achieve their political goals. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the interconnectedness of emotions and politics. Emotions in everyday life or in the "micropolitical" world of global politics are often ambivalent and complex. This ambivalence lies in the generation of emotions and their interaction within domestic and international political frameworks, which contributes to the formation of "geopolitical subjects" (Schick, 2019). Emotions are an integral part of our "common sense structures" and significantly influence our perception of the world. Everyday culture plays a key role in shaping citizens' emotional narratives towards the state, influencing their emotional engagement in politics, or even resisting dominant structures by creating "spaces of contention" (Wolak, Sokhey 2022). At a basic individual level, emotions are subjective, conscious responses to specific circumstances that manifest outwardly as personal feelings. Given the diverse ways in which emotions are expressed and practiced, it is important to focus on the so-called negotiation of emotions (Beattie et al. 2019). In the political sphere, there is a constant interaction between the dominant emotional narratives of the state and the ongoing efforts of the masses to free themselves from emotional influence. This struggle involves individuals or groups striving to free themselves from the emotional control imposed on them by the dominant elites of the state. Koschut points out that everyday expressions of emotion in the political sphere can serve as sites of contestation, where individuals or groups express resistance to existing power structures. This resistance can take both direct and indirect forms, from mass protests and demonstrations to more subtle ways such as symbolic gestures or actions that disrupt hegemonic emotional narratives. An example would be symbolic acts of resistance against authoritarian governments that use emotions such as fear to control the public (Koschut, 2019).

Gaining control over the power elites and their decision-making in politics is facilitated by the rational aspect of voter decision-making at the expense of emotionality. According to **M.**

Čambáliková and **M. Uhlerová** *"the information society, in close connection with civil society, creates a very suitable system for citizens to control the power elite, for broad political and mimipolitical citizen participation, for increasing the possibility of influencing public affairs, expressing opinions on adopted policies, development strategies, and participating in decision-making and control processes"* (Čambáliková, Uhlerová, 2021, p. 17).

Another important aspect is the connection between emotions and political identity. **C. Zhang** introduces the concept of "geopolitical imaginaries," which arise from the interaction of emotions with political realities. These imaginaries shape the way an individual or group perceives their place within the broader political community. Emotions such as pride, shame, or solidarity are key in the creation and maintenance of national identity, but these dynamics can also serve to exacerbate differences in international relations (Zhang, 2022). Everyday interactions and cultural structures influence citizens' emotional engagement in politics. These cultural elements can help shape positive relationships between citizens and the state, or conversely, support critical attitudes that lead to change and new forms of political engagement.

One of the major theories in the field of studying emotions in elections is the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus, 2000). This theory argues that emotions such as anxiety and enthusiasm play a crucial role in mobilizing voters and their willingness to change their decisions. According to this theory, anxiety motivates voters to become more involved in political issues, seek new information, and potentially change their voting behavior. On the other hand, enthusiasm promotes the consolidation of existing preferences and the stability of voting behavior. He focused on how emotions influence the perception of political events, the formation of political attitudes, and the behavior of voters, especially in the context of political campaigns and political opinion groups. According to **Marcus**, emotions are not just passive reactions to political events, but actively shape the way individuals perceive politics, evaluate political leaders, and decide who to vote for. **Marcus** viewed emotions as a crucial component of political behavior that can lead to voter mobilization, engagement in political debates and decision-making, and polarization across the political spectrum. As part of his theories on emotions in politics, **Marcus** emphasizes that political campaigns, especially those that use negative emotions such as fear or anger, are able to effectively mobilize voters. These emotions have a powerful impact on political activity because they evoke a strong response that increases citizen interest and engagement. For example, anger can be a motivation to participate in elections because a voter feels the need to change a state of affairs that they perceive as wrong or unjust. He also points out that emotions such as fear can lead to a defensive reaction, where voters vote out of fear of negative consequences rather than out of belief in the positive aspects of a candidate or political party (Marcus, 2000). This mechanism is particularly used in campaigns where a threat (such as an economic crisis or a change in cultural identity) is emphasized in order to encourage greater political activity or support for a particular political agenda. His research shows that strong emotions such as anger and fear increase divisions between political groups. When a voter feels emotionally attacked or threatened by an "enemy" (a political party or ideology that is perceived as opposing), this can lead to even greater divisions between different political groups and impair individuals'

ability to communicate and cooperate across the political spectrum. This phenomenon can be especially dangerous in democratic societies, where communication between different political camps is crucial for solving problems. Emotions in politics do not operate in isolation from cognitive processes. In fact, emotions and reason complement and influence each other. According to his theories, emotions such as anger or enthusiasm are able to influence political decision-making by simplifying complex information and helping individuals make decisions quickly when they do not have enough time or information for in-depth analysis. These emotions can affect not only the behavior of voters, but also the decision-making of political leaders who try to use the public's emotional reaction to achieve their political goals. An important aspect of **Marcus's** research is the relationship between emotions and the aforementioned political identity. Emotions play a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of individuals' political identities. Political beliefs and opinions on political issues are often shaped not only by rational factors, but also by strong emotional ties to political parties and leaders. In this sense, emotions reinforce existing political beliefs and help create strong ties between individuals and political groups that can last for a long time. Ultimately, **Marcus** contributed to the understanding of emotions in politics by showing how important the emotional aspect of political behavior is. His research shows that emotions are not just reactions to political events, but play an active role in shaping political decisions and influencing political dynamics.

We need to be aware that we live in an era where expressing anger has become much more acceptable than in the past. In recent decades, we have seen the boom of social media, which has made anger in particular a much more significant and widely shared emotion. And this is again something that is carried over into mainstream media content. Mediated anger often refers to collective anger. For example, it is the anger of doctors who are not paid well enough, or the anger of refugees who are outraged by the way a particular government treats them. It is the anger of groups of people who feel some injustice. This means that in most cases, mediated anger is potentially political, because it is collective. Indeed, populist politicians have discovered that expressing public outrage is an effective way to channel the emotions of the public. Essentially, they translate the feelings of dissatisfaction among voters into their own rhetoric. This approach proves to be highly effective for populist politicians, as it allows them to capture the attention of potential voters by addressing their grievances and giving voice to their frustrations. The emotional appeal, especially through anger and frustration, serves as a powerful tool in mobilizing support and creating a strong connection with disillusioned groups within society.

Recently, we have seen an increasing number of celebrities or public figures entering politics. The second thing we observe is that politicians are using metaphors, language and various comparisons from popular culture much more often. It can be said that over the past few decades, pop culture and politics have become closer to each other. We can talk about the feeling of devotion to a politician as "fandom", which is an emotional attachment to a certain text or a specific popular figure. Voters project specific qualities onto political leaders, which creates an emotional attachment. These individuals focus on the lives and character traits of politicians, which leads them to perceive them as related entities with whom they can identify.

This process can be compared to the parasocial relationship experienced by fans of fictional characters, whether from television series, films or other media content. This creates an emotional bond between the voter and the politician. *"We are witnessing a certain pattern according to which it is almost a condition for politicians to be able to authentically express their emotions. The most successful politicians are therefore those who show their feelings, whether positive or negative emotions, and are able to do so in a way that makes them seem authentic. One of them is, for example, V. Zelensky, who as an actor understands the pitfalls of performance. But paradoxically, it is precisely because he has an acting background that he is able to appear authentic. He works with both positive and negative emotions in a way that naturally copies political goals - in his case, of course, it is about saving Ukraine by all available means"* (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2023).

In today's political landscape it is increasingly evident that politicians must pay increased attention to media logic, which includes focusing on factors that are most advantageous in the media context. The ability to authentically express emotions is becoming an integral part of this dynamic. Politicians must continue to embody policies that resonate with voters and reflect their values and expectations. At the same time, it is increasingly important for them to have developed emotional intelligence, the ability to authentically express their feelings and create an emotional connection with voters. Without this ability, it will be increasingly difficult for politicians to achieve success in today's media and political environment.

3. Analysis of emotional strategies in parliamentary elections in 2023

Compared to the previous parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2016, a slight increase in voter turnout was recorded in 2023, which was around 68% (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2023). This increase can be attributed to a more significant mobilization of voters, who perceived these elections as crucial for the political development of the country, especially in the context of a difficult political situation and elections in economic and geopolitical challenges.

Voters in the 2023 elections showed great diversity in political preferences, with a shift away from the original, traditional parties and an increase in support for new political movements and leaders. The rapidly changing political mood is related to the loss of support for some parties due to their failure to implement political programs in previous election periods.

Voter fluctuation between parties was evident in 2023, with some parties seeing significant gains while others losing significant portions of their voters. Voter dynamics were influenced in 2020 by the idea of calling for change and fighting corruption. In 2023, it was influenced by dissatisfaction with the previous government, which led to the return of *Smer-SD* and growing polarization between liberal and conservative parties.

In these elections, several significant factors could be identified that influenced the results:

- *Generational differences*: younger voters, especially in the 18–29 age group, increasingly supported liberal and progressive parties such as *Progressive Slovakia* and moved away from traditional, more conservative parties such as *Smer-SD* and *SNS*. This trend is reflected in the

overall focus on environmental, pro-European and social issues that resonated with young people.

- *Regions*: Voters from the western and central regions of Slovakia preferred liberal and pro-European parties, while traditional parties prevailed in the eastern regions, which caused significant regional differences in support for individual political parties.

- *Protest votes*: Given the failure of political elites to solve everyday problems, the 2023 elections became a kind of reaction to previous failures. Several voters decided to support new or opposition parties, thus expressing their disillusionment with the governance and stagnation in the country.

The early parliamentary elections of 2023 were characterized by strong polarization of society. Political polarization is one of the significant risk and negative factors in society. If society is significantly politically divided, there is a danger of uncritical admiration for one's own political party and complete rejection of the opposition. In such a situation, voters are often willing to ignore the causes or mistakes of the preferred party, just to avoid supporting a rival party. This dynamic can lead to stagnation of the political scene and increasing tension in the country.

The polarization of society is influenced by the personality structure of the individual and his way of perceiving the world. Research from 2018, authored by **M. Rollwage, R. Dolan, S. Fleming**, suggests that people with more radical political views, whether on the right or left end of the political spectrum, show a lower level of metacognitive abilities. (Rollwage, Dolan, Fleming, 2018). *"Research participants with radical beliefs therefore learned more slowly from their own mistakes in model tasks and had more difficulty assessing exact evidence that contradicted their own views. They also tended to ignore the views of their opponents"* (Fábik, 2024). In a strongly polarized society, a charismatic political leader almost always plays a key role, attracting his voters with dominance and often creating an impression of security and certainty, although this is often just an illusion. According to psychoanalyst **E. Fromm**, a leader with pronounced narcissistic traits and a belief in his own exceptionalism can more easily convince a wide audience of his uniqueness. Although many do not realize it, we are often attracted to people with psychopathic traits, such as unwavering self-confidence or pronounced arrogance towards opponents, which many find extremely attractive. If a political leader who appears confident and charismatic abuses his mandate and evidence of his immoral practices begins to emerge, the risk of polarization in society increases significantly. Part of the population may seek legal action against this politician, while another part, influenced by his charisma and image, refuses to give him up. **S. P. Nicholson's** (2012) article entitled *"Polarizing Cues"* shows that if such a controversial leader also starts issuing controversial statements, polarization in society will deepen even further (Nicholson, 2012).

From the knowledge of the socio-political situation, we can conclude that the polarization of society in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia influenced voter decision-making in several fundamental ways. Political parties and leaders used polarizing topics such as migration, the rule of law, relations with the European Union, or cultural and ethical issues to mobilize their voter bases. This approach evoked strong emotional reactions that often overshadowed rational consideration of the parties' program priorities. In a polarized environment, the spread

of disinformation became a tool for reinforcing negative emotions and fears. Disinformation often exploited sensitive topics, thereby manipulating voters into supporting specific parties or candidates. Voters leaned toward parties that best represented their position on the main polarizing topics. This led to the strengthening of parties with a strong ideological orientation, such as *Smer-SD* on the one hand and *Progressive Slovakia* on the other. Topics such as LGBTI+ rights, abortion, and the church also became a tool for strengthening polarization between liberal and conservative voters. Polarization was also evident at the geographical level. In regions with lower economic performance or weaker infrastructure, support for parties such as *Smer-SD* was higher, while urban and more educated voters tended towards *Progressive Slovakia* and other liberal parties. Parties in a strongly polarized environment intensively used negative campaigns aimed at discrediting opponents. This strengthened the polarization of the voter base and reduced the ability to compromise or find middle ground solutions. Such an impact of polarization led to higher voter turnout, but also to a deeper division of society, which may have long-term consequences for the political and social stability of Slovakia in the future.

In the elections, emotions played a key role in voters' decision-making. It was mostly fear of the future and uncertainty (e.g. migration, economic crisis, security risks). Political entities, such as *Smer-SD*, intensively appealed to the feeling of threat and the need for stability and protection. Fears of the "disruption of traditional values" or the ideological direction of the country (e.g. in connection with *Progressive Slovakia*) motivated some voters to support conservative or populist parties. Many voters expressed anger towards the current political establishment, corruption cases and the perception of the dysfunctionality of the state. This anger was often directed at parties that promised "order" or "purification". Frustration with the pandemic management and political instability during the previous government increased support for parties that criticized the former leadership and offered simple solutions. Among some voters, especially younger and better educated ones, the hope for change and modernization of the country prevailed. This emotion was key to the success of parties such as *Progressive Slovakia*. This optimism was linked to trust in reforms and Slovakia's European direction. Although voter turnout increased, some voters remained skeptical or apathetic, which was caused by the feeling that the elections could not really change their situation. We conclude that these emotions were exploited electorally through strong rhetoric, negative campaigns and polarizing themes, which resulted in high voter engagement, but also in deepening social contradictions.

Polarizing topics are easier to communicate and more effectively mobilize voters than complex and rational program proposals. High levels of distrust in state institutions and politicians reduced voters' willingness to analyze party programs and engage in rational decision-making. The dominance of emotional decision-making over rational was evidence that emotional messages have an immediate and intuitive effect, while rational arguments require more time to understand and critically evaluate. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, the media preferred confrontational topics and dramatic events, which created an emotionally charged environment. Many voters had already experienced disappointment with politicians in the past, which led them to make decisions based on emotions such as anger or a desire for change,

instead of rational consideration. Also, the lack of political literacy and the poor ability to critically analyze information contributed to voters being more easily influenced by emotional rhetoric.

The nature of the negative campaign conducted by some political parties reinforced the aspect of personal attacks by politicians. For example, **R. Fico** repeatedly criticized **M. Šimečka** for his lack of political experience and ideological orientation. Manipulative videos and images that depicted opponents in a negative light, often without context, were spread in the campaigns. Social networks served as the main tool for spreading negative messages. Short offensive videos, meme images and posts with emotionally charged content achieved a high reach. (Elections 2023: Aggressive..., 2023). Social network algorithms supported polarizing content, thereby strengthening the effect of the negative campaign. Parties purposefully appealed to fear and anger to motivate voters to come to the polls. For example, rhetoric about the "threat to Slovakia by liberalism" (*Smer-SD*) or the "return of the mafia" (*OĽaNO*) served to strengthen the sense of urgency. **I. Matovič** and his party targeted the negative campaign against *Smer-SD* and *Hlas-SD*, emphasizing their alleged links to corruption and oligarchs. Although *Hlas-SD* officially emphasized a more conciliatory tone, the campaign also included criticisms of *Smer-SD* and right-wing parties.

M. Uhrík's *Republika* party used a negative campaign against liberal and pro-European parties, especially *Progressive Slovakia*, using rhetoric about "imposing foreign ideologies". The party effectively used social media to encourage young people to participate in the elections. The "We Want Change" campaign spread on Instagram and TikTok was aimed at emotional mobilization and creating pressure for change. *Progressive Slovakia* focused on criticizing *Smer-SD* and its policies. It pointed to corruption scandals and **R. Fico**'s use of polarizing topics. Although their rhetoric was not as aggressive, they responded to the attacks and emphasized the danger of the return of the so-called old set. The *SNS* party led by **A. Danko** attacked competing national-conservative entities to strengthen its own image. Compared to other parties, the *KDH* was less confrontational, but in its campaign it criticized liberal and left-wing parties for threatening Christian values. Their negative rhetoric was less pronounced, but was present mainly on cultural and ethical topics. Television debates and political shows were full of harsh rhetoric, which further deepened the division of voters.

The most prominent ones included:

- *Appeal to fear and uncertainty* (threats related to the international situation such as the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis or migration): *Smer-SD*, *Republika* party.
- *Arousing hope and optimism* (motivating voters with a positive vision of the future, emphasizing the need for reforms, modernization and Slovakia's pro-European orientation): *Progressive Slovakia*.
- *Mobilizing anger and dissatisfaction* (criticism of previous governments, corruption, incompetence and social injustices): *Smer-SD*, *Republika* party, *OĽaNO* and friends.
- *Appeal to national pride and identity* (nationalist parties used symbols and rhetoric emphasizing national values, traditions and sovereignty, thereby appealing to voters with a strong sense of national identity): *Smer-SD*, *Republika* party, *SNS*.

- Arousing compassion and solidarity (some political parties focused on social issues such as helping disadvantaged groups, pensioners or families with children, thus appealing to empathy and solidarity of voters) : *Hlas-SD*.

These emotional strategies were supported by various communication tools, including social media, public speeches and visual materials, in order to maximize their reach to different segments of voters. With the above arguments, we confirm the validity of the hypothesis we examined and conclude that voter behavior in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in 2023 was significantly determined by the media presentation of political parties, with emotions and topics associated with the polarization of society playing a more significant role than rational arguments and programmatic priorities of the parties.

Conclusion

The socio-political climate before the 2023 elections was the result of complex factors, including the polarization of the political scene, the intense emotionality of the campaigns, and the information chaos caused by social networks. The tense atmosphere, distrust of the system, and strong mobilization of both camps significantly influenced the nature of the elections and the decision-making of voters, leaving long-term traces on Slovak society. One of the main problems of the current political reality can be considered the growing skepticism among voters towards politics as a tool for real change. Many citizens are losing trust in the ability of politics to influence their daily lives, which leads to a predominantly protest-oriented character of their participation in elections. They often perceive elections as a means of situational disagreement or even entertainment, without deeper reflection on the long-term consequences of their decisions. This trend creates favorable conditions for political strategies that focus on emotional stimuli and immediate impulses, prioritizing short-term effectiveness over offering systematic and sustainable solutions.

We conclude that in the 2023 parliamentary elections, emotions played a key role in voter decision-making. The political party *Smer-SD* sought to evoke the emotion of fear by highlighting the consequences of the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and alleged threats associated with military aid to Ukraine. The emotion of anger was used to criticize previous governments, emphasizing corruption scandals within the opposition and the incompetence of their leaders. Last but not least, the party tried to appeal to national pride by focusing on the protection of Slovak national interests and emphasizing resistance to foreign influences, particularly from Brussels and Washington.

Progressive Slovakia, during the pre-election period, focused more on emotions such as hope, optimism, and curiosity, presenting Slovakia as a modern, tolerant, and progressive country with European values. The party also appealed for reforms, modernization of education and healthcare, and the protection of minority rights. The emotion of curiosity stemmed from new faces in politics, who were expected to offer effective solutions based on data and scientific knowledge.

Negative emotions such as fear, resistance, and anger were presented by the *Republika* party. They criticized issues like migration, the EU, NATO, and pointed to the threats of losing Slovak identity, calling for opposition to the liberal agenda, globalization, and mainstream media. The campaign strongly condemned the previous government and foreign influence on Slovakia. The emotions of stability, trust, and compassion were associated with the pre-election strategy of the *Hlas-SD* party. The party presented itself as a guarantee of peaceful governance, free from conflict and chaos. **P. Pellegrini** used his high popularity and perception as a trustworthy leader, focusing the campaign on social issues, supporting pensioners and families, and improving healthcare and care for the vulnerable.

OLaNO and friends evoked contrasting emotions, on the one hand frustration and anger by pointing out past mistakes and corruption scandals of other parties, fighting against oligarchs and the alleged system of clientelism, and on the other hand offering hope with promises of fighting for "ordinary people" and solving everyday citizens' problems.

The emotion of nostalgia and pride was strategically used by the *SNS* party, which emphasized the protection of Slovak interests, symbols and traditions.

The results of the 2023 elections indicated that Slovakia is entering a new political cycle, which will likely be characterized by tense coalition negotiations and continued fragmentation of the political scene.

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