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Capturing populist elements in mediated discourse: The case of the 2020 Slovak parliamentary election

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Abstract

The article measures the degree of populist elements present in party leaders' discourses delivered as a part of their appearances in TV debates during the run up to the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections. With the use of the 'holistic grading' approach, we empirically capture the presence and prominence of populist elements in textual transcripts of speeches delivered by four opposition party leaders. We start by defining populism as a discourse which can express a set of unique ideas and then follow up with arguments for the use of party leaders' communication as the object of analysis. We then proceed to operationalize the exact coding process of the 'holistic grading' method which is used in our analysis. The measurement results quantitatively represent the degree of populist elements in the communication delivered during the electoral campaign. We note that the 'holistic grading' method was successfully able to capture populist elements in the performances of actors who have been previously labelled populist. We find consistent use of populist discourse in the performances of Boris Kollár, Igor Matovič, and Marián Kotleba, with the latter two producing several extremely populist performances. We then discuss our results and further implications derived from the collected data.

Keywords: populism; discourse; Slovakia; elections

1 Introduction

This article addresses the increasing expansion of the 'populist wave' by analysing the recent situation in a specific country – The Slovak Republic. Its primary purpose is to provide a descriptive analysis of the level of populism present in debate performances of Slovak party leaders. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the larger discussion in academia about who deserves to be described as populist and what should constitute the prerequisite of such a conceptual label. Acknowledging that political communication can be analysed to empirically capture populist appeals, we have decided to measure the presence and prominence of populist elements in the discourse of four Slovak party leaders, de-

livered during their performances in TV debates in the period leading up to the 2020 parliamentary elections. We have done so also to test the applicability of a specific method for analysing populist discourse – the quantitative holistic grading – in the context of the Slovak political environment. Our main contribution to the ongoing research on populism thus lies mainly in providing empirical data about populist discourse at the party leadership level, where most of the decision-making power gets concentrated after a party wins the elections and forms a government. Finally, we have also attempted to verify whether actors described as populist by scholars do actually demonstrate populist elements in their discourse, and thus contribute to the larger debate on *why* or under which circumstances someone should be labelled as populist (Kocijan, 2015).

The article starts by conceptualizing populism as a specific type of discourse which can be employed by political actors to express a particular set of ideas: *Manichean understanding of politics*, *people-centredness* and *anti-elitism*. After that, we briefly address the Slovak context and justify our selection of actors and the format of the selected corpus by making a case for the analysis of discourse delivered during non-scripted public debates on TV. We then introduce the basics of the holistic grading approach developed by Kirk Hawkins which has already been employed as a methodological tool in cross-regional comparison of political manifestos and speeches (Hawkins et al., 2018). In the next part, we introduce the holistic grading process in detail with its operationalized coding dimensions. After that, we present our results and address positive cases. A brief discussion is followed by concluding remarks. Overall, the data gathered for this study indicate that Hawkins' (2009) method has been able to successfully capture populist elements in the discourse of Slovak party leaders, specifically in the debate performances from Igor Matovič, Boris Kollár and Marián Kotleba.

2 Populism as discourse

The concept of populism has received significant academic coverage in the last two decades (Taggart, 2002; Mudde, 2007; Hawkins, 2010; Müller, 2017). While there have been numerous different approaches to studying this rather ambiguous phenomenon, three distinct research traditions are generally identified at the core of modern populism studies: populism as a political ideology, populism as a strategy and populism as a discourse (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016). Whether they understand it as a grouping of interconnected ideas about the nature of politics (Mudde, 2004), a top-down political mobilisation strategy (Weyland, 2001) or a specific political-rhetoric style (Panizza, 2005), these definitions generally agree that the concept of populism revolves around two core elements: glorification of the good willed, homogenous people and criticism towards the corrupt, self-serving elite. In the populist narrative, these groups are presented as being in an antagonistic relationship. The dualistic people-elite dichotomy framed through actors' political discourse is fundamental to populism (Laclau, 2005).

The emerging academic research on populism has contributed to a general consensus that populism should be best understood as a set of *ideas* which are being articulated through the discourse of political actors (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2009; Kocijan, 2015; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, it is now widely accepted among scholars that

populist ideas (elements) manifest themselves in the discursive patterns of political actors (Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2018). Distancing ourselves from making binary assessments – an actor is populist or not – we follow the logic that individual performances and texts can be more or less populist, measured by the presence and prominence of populist appeals that they contain.

One of the dominant approaches to conceptualising populism is known as the *ideational approach*, which understands populism as a specific type of political discourse used to express a unique set of ideas; one that politics should be viewed as a Manichean (dualistic) struggle between a reified ‘will of the people’ and a conspiring, ‘evil elite’ (Hawkins, 2009; 2010). Under the ideational definition, populism as discourse should demonstrate three core features: a) Manichean and often moral understanding of politics; b) the proclamation of ‘the people’ as a homogenous and virtuous community; and c) the depiction of ‘the elite’ or ‘the establishment’ as a corrupt and self-serving entity (Hawkins et al., 2018). The approach to populism as a specific type of discourse has already yielded advanced research in the field, mainly in cross-regional studies through textual analysis, survey research and experiments (Kocijan, 2015; Grbeša & Šalaj, 2018; Jenne et al., 2021). One of Hawkins’ (2009; 2010) most significant contributions has been the development of a complex coding rubric for the measurement of various levels of populism through a textual analysis, which he has applied to Latin American cases, mainly by analysing party manifestos and speeches. As we decided to employ this coding rubric in our analysis, we discuss the methodology of this measurement framework in a separate methods section, after briefly addressing the Slovak context and our decision to focus on televised debates.

3 The context of the 2020 Slovak elections

As a region where populism has significantly marked political culture and shaped political frontiers, Slovakia serves as an ideal case study for analysing populist communication. Spáč (2012, p. 1) notes that for several political actors in this region, ‘populism became a primary or a secondary weapon in their struggle to gain public support, though with varying degrees of success.’

The result of the 2020 elections, in which we have witnessed the fall of a long-term hegemon with the emergence of electorally successful anti-establishment challengers, brought about a resurgent academic interest in populism and its manifestations in Slovakia and the region (Rossi, 2020; Scheiring, 2021). As around half of the Slovak electorate voted for a party which has been labelled populist, the 2020 elections resulted in a significant turn, with the overall electoral victory for parties branded as populist and also, a clear parliamentary majority for such forces (Havlík et al., 2020, p. 228). The ‘demand side’ of such change – shifting attitudes and preferences among Slovak voters – has been a subject of several articles that analyse survey and poll data in order to explain electoral volatility and the anti-establishment mobilisation which led to the success of populist parties in the 2020 elections (Gyárfášová, 2018; Gyárfášová & Linek, 2020; Gyárfášová & Učen, 2020; Lysek et al., 2020).

The ‘supply side’ has been mostly filled out by works that analyse individual populist parties in terms of the antagonistic narratives that they produce (Walter, 2019; Školkaý

& Žúborová, 2019; Kazharski, 2019). We wish to add to this group of works and to comparatively address the differences and similarities between the various types of populist manifestations in Slovak politics, i.e. how populist narratives constructed by one actor differ from those produced by others. Thus, we propose a systematic, empirical analysis of the discourse produced by several competing Slovak populist actors during a single electoral campaign, which would contribute to our understanding of the role that this phenomenon played in the 2020 elections. With the party landscape in the legislative body dynamically shifting with almost each parliamentary election in Slovakia (Havlík et al., 2020), we find it important to fill out this gap by focusing on actors that have mostly gained political momentum during the last decade. While three of our four analysed actors took part in the formation of the government after the 2020 elections, none of them has been active in Slovak politics before 2010.

Our analysis should provide a more detailed snapshot of the populist practice in Slovakia. The latest global populism dataset that employs Hawkins' coding method on speeches delivered by political leaders all around the world covers Slovak prime ministers 'only' up to the period of 2018 and focuses explicitly on official public speech acts delivered during their incumbency (Hawkins et al., 2019). While we employ the same coding rubric, our article departs from such large-N, cross-border comparison by focusing on the within-polity dimension, i.e. the differences between various populist manifestations at the level of a single country. Such narrowed-down focus offers a more fine-grained analysis of concrete narratives and speech acts produced by Slovak politicians during a specific time-frame. A single-country study with a relatively small-N sample of analysed politicians allows us to comment on possible nuances of populist narratives produced in this region. Rather than attempting to arrive at findings that could be considered applicable beyond our case, this article aims to provide insight regarding the populist messages produced by Slovak politicians in recent years and also to test the use of the holistic grading approach on a rather unorthodox data corpus – the transcripts of mediated political debates broadcast during the electoral campaign period. While we are aware that our offering could be characterized as 'mere description', we concur with Gerring (2012) that description is an intrinsically valuable aspect of scientific research. Our work then simply offers a 'generalizing descriptive inference' (Gerring, 2012) that follows an indicator of populist speech and proposes an answer about the extent and manner of populist discourse present in several politicians' pre-election debate performances.

4 Case for debates

Shifting away from the dominant paradigm in current empirical research on populism, we have decided to apply Hawkins' (2009) methodological tool on a format, on which, according to our knowledge, it has not been applied yet. Rather than using manifestos or speeches as data units, which present a common choice for content analysis of populist discourse in the academic work on this topic (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2009; Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2016; Di Cocco & Monechi, 2021), our article analyses public political debates.

In a political environment where parties are heavily personalised, the analysis of party leaders' performances in political debates may provide a more valuable insight into

the main programmatic aspects and party position on particular issues. Especially in the case of parties branded as populist, Heinisch notes that ‘it is the leader who determines the political direction, which in turn may deviate substantially from the written programme or from decisions taken by relevant party committees’ (Heinisch, 2003, p. 94). Statements delivered during political debates can be considered far more spontaneous and less guarded than they would be in an officially prepared discourse. Under these circumstances, it can be assumed that these performances will reflect the ‘fundamentals of politicians’ discourse’ (Grbeša & Šalaj, 2018).

We have decided to analyse the performances of four actors, all of them members of the opposition before the elections, with three of them being labelled as populist, or being members of parties, which have been denoted as populist in the present scientific discourse.¹ The fourth, non-populist actor has been included in the sample as a litmus test of the validity of the grading method, as we expect his scores to be relatively low compared to actors denoted as populist by scholars. Only actors who consistently took part in the election debates during the campaign period have been considered. As a result, Slovak party leaders who met the criteria for selection were the later short-time prime minister Igor Matovič (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), the current speaker of the parliament Boris Kollár (We Are Family), their coalition partner Richard Sulík (Freedom and Solidarity), and finally, the leader of the then second largest opposition party in terms of allocated seats, Marián Kotleba (People’s Party Our Slovakia).

The question which we are able to answer is whether, and to what degree do political actors, who are generally labelled as populist, employ populist discourse in their performances in pre-election TV debates. Our research question can therefore be structured as: To what degree have Slovak party leaders previously labelled as populist, demonstrated elements of populist discourse defined by the ideational approach in their performances on mediated debates during the period of 2019/2020 electoral campaign?

The contribution of our research thus mainly lies in providing empirical insight regarding the presence and prominence of populist elements in the discourse of Slovak political actors which took part in the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections, allowing us to make evidence-based claims regarding the denomination of these actors as populist.

5 Methodological and conceptual framework

Having established why we decided to employ Hawkins’ (2009) methodological approach for the measurement of populist discourse in the television debates, in the next two sections we turn to methodological considerations. The analysed corpus consists of transcripts of political debates, excluding the words of the TV presenters, coding only answers/statements of the analysed actor. The presence of investigated components is traced on the level of a whole performance that is treated as a single unit of measurement. Our methodology follows Hawkins’ (2009) data-driven discourse analysis with decimal grading, which he has developed during his measurement of Latin American populist politicians.

¹ Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (Meijers & Zaslove, 2018).

When it comes to the coding process of a politicians' discourse, one of us coded all selected transcribed TV debates and then, to verify the reliability of the coding process, we trained a second coder to go through the identical textual corpus and also apply the same coding rubric originally designed by Hawkins (2009). Coders were not able to see each other's results until the end of the coding process. Both coders also provided an overall comment for each performance, in which they justify the allocation of grades.

The development of the coding rubric has been based on the principle of holistic quantitative approach to evaluating textual sources, which 'works by assessing the overall qualities of text and then assessing a single grade without any intervening calculations' (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1049). The rubric itself revolves around three core elements of populist discourse laid down in the ideational approach to studying populism: the cosmology of *Manichean vision*; and two important ontological premises: the association of positive attributes with the good, common *people*, and the demonization of conspiring, *evil elite*. These are the dimensions of populist discourse coders should attempt to identify in the communication of political actors when using the rubric developed by Hawkins (2009).

The first core dimension, *Manichean vision*, refers to the dualistic, 'black and white' way of perceiving politics that is commonly present in the populist discourse. Populist actors will claim that there are only two sides to each coin – you are either with them or against them, with no middle ground being acceptable. Both 'good' and 'evil' camps of the dualistic struggle have a particular identity – the people are good, whereas the elites are bad and corrupt. Additionally, this can lead to the use of strongly moralised, often emotionally charged, and aggressive language that is common for populist discourse, with most political issues reduced to moral terms of good and evil. For example, Hugo Chávez referred to the election as a contest between the forces of good and evil, and claimed that the opposition represents 'the Devil himself', while the forces allied with the Bolivarian cause were identified with Christ (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1043).

The *populist notion of the people* is probably the most characteristic attribute of the populist discourse. As a part of the dualistic ontology, the good always has a particular identity – the will of the people. The mass of citizens is presented as being a homogenous, rightful sovereign with a unified collective interest, and the government has to be constructed in such a way that it will embody this unified will (Hawkins, 2010). The people can often be identified with the nation, which is common for right-wing populism, or with a particular social stratum, religious group, ethnic group and so on. For example, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has been known to stress that as a politician, he is dedicated to serve the country, presenting the abstract 'will of the people' as the highest decision guiding principle in politics. For Orbán, 'the government either does what the people want or it will become oustable' (Orbán, 2007a, as cited in Seongcheol, 2021, p. 339). The existence of a unified people's will is usually demonstrated through statements that claim to know what people, as an abstract mass, want/refuse, or what they like/dislike.

On the other side of the dualistic struggle, stands *the evil elite*. Populists are preoccupied with discovering and identifying their enemy, as this process helps to 'negatively constitute the people' (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1044). Within the Manichaeic discourse, it is common that a conspiring minority of elites has subverted the will of the people and now has an illegitimate control over some aspects of the governance (Hawkins, 2010). The identity of the enemy may vary according to a given context. These may be intellectuals,

democratic institutions or media, international political actors, a particular ideology and so on. For example, members of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party have verbally attacked the Constitutional Court judges for 'impeding governments' attempts to deliver its electoral promises to the people' (Kelemen & Orenstein, 2016, p. 4). Leader of the ruling party, Jarosław Kaczyński, has boasted that he wants to break up the 'band of cronies' in the nation's highest judicial body, accusing them of 'only protecting their own interests' (Agence France-Presse, 2015).

As our unit of analysis is a whole performance of an actor in a debate, one coding rubric is assigned per one performance (4 performances per actor, 16 in total). The outcome of the coding constitutes a filled-out rubric with a score and a set of representative quotes for each of three core elements of populist discourse described above.

6 Grading

When it comes to the actual grading of the debates, coders have employed decimal scores ranging from 0.0 to 2.0 to evaluate the presence of populist discourse in each textual transcript of a performance delivered during the debate. These grades should be based on the presence or absence of particular elements of populist discourse (codes) described in the previous section. As described by Hawkins (2009), the 0–1–2 scale for overall grading of textual sources is defined as follows:

0 (0–0.4): A speech in this category uses few if any populist elements. Such speech act is not considered populist as it lacks the simultaneous presence of some notion of a popular will in a conflict with an evil, conspiring elite.

1 (0.5–1.4): A speech in this category includes strong, clearly populist elements but either does not use them consistently or tempers them by including non-populist elements.

2 (1.5–2.0): A speech in this category is extremely populist and comes very close to the ideal populist discourse. Such performance expresses all or nearly all of the elements of ideal populist discourse and has few elements that would be considered non-populist.

As for coding non-populist elements, Hawkins' (2009) coding rubric has space reserved for pluralist appeals to be filled in. Coders were therefore asked not only to translate and copy citations that capture populist elements, but also pluralist ones. Political pluralism rejects an idea of a homogenous, general will, acknowledging plurality of opinions within society. As a direct opposite to the dualistic perspective of populism, pluralists believe that a society should have many centres of power and that politics should reflect the interests and values of as many different groups as possible (Hawkins et al., 2018). In terms of the 'evil elite notion', pluralism does not single out any evil ruling minority and refrains from describing the political opposition as evil. By providing exemplary quotes that demonstrate pluralist appeals, a coder can prove that a particular performance also demonstrates non-populist elements and should therefore be considered less populist. To put it simply, the more populist a particular discourse is, the fewer pluralist elements it will feature, and vice versa (Hawkins et al., 2018).

The decimal grades located in between, are mainly used to avoid the difficulty of having to decide between the three blunt categories (0, 1, 2), if one considers the presence and prominence of populist features in a particular discourse to be somewhere in be-

tween. This allows the coder to demonstrate even the slightest differentiation between two different populist performances, by moving up or down on the scale based on the consistency and prominence of the analysed dimensions. The general rule however is that 0.5 rounds up to a categorical 1, and 1.5 rounds up to a categorical 2. These qualitative differences should therefore be considered when assigning a decimal point to a particular discourse (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017).

The overall grade for a particular performance has been assigned based on the presence and prominence of the three core populist dimensions. Coders were asked to first give individual grades (0.0–2.0) for each populist element/dimension: *Manichean discourse*, *people-centredness* and *anti-elitism*, and support these grades by representative quotes. After obtaining these individual grades, an overall grade was assigned to the performance which would categorise a particular discourse through the three-point scale (0–1–2). It is important to stress that two of the elements, *populist notion of the people* and the *notion of the evil elite*, are jointly necessary to be present in a textual source for it to be considered at least somehow populist (Hawkins, 2010).

Generally, if only two of the three core elements – people centrism and anti-elitism – are present in a performance, the overall grade for such performance cannot exceed the value of 1.4, as this is the highest decimal number that still rounds to 1. If each of the three core elements is present in the performance, a particular discourse can receive a grade between 1.5–2.0 and can be considered an ideal populist discourse. The presence of the first populist element, the *Manichean vision*, demonstrated through strong, dualistic language therefore helps to distinguish an ideal populist discourse (1.5–2.0) from an ordinary populist one (0.5–1.4). Finally, a discourse which receives an overall grade of 0.4 or lower (as this rounds down to 0), will most likely demonstrate only one, or none of the core elements, and will therefore not be considered populist.

To summarise, the whole grading process proceeded as follows: First, coders went through the data by analysing the transcriptions of performances delivered by politicians in television debates. While doing so, coders were supposed to write down representative quotes which demonstrate the presence of any of the three core elements of populist discourse. These would then be filled into relevant rubrics' slots with a grade assigned for each individual element based on the presence and prominence of a particular core populist element in a debate. Coders were also asked to write down and fill in representative quotes which have had elements of pluralist/pragmatist ideas operationalized in the rubric, in order to prove that a particular performance is less populist or not populist at all. Coders then finally assigned an overall grade to the performance based on the overall presence/absence of the populist elements. In the next part, we present our results and provide a brief qualitative summary of coders' judgments and comments, which have been used to justify the allocation of the overall grades.

7 Results

This section is an overview of the debate performances of the four politicians and a description of the populist elements in their speech. Table 1 summarises the overall grades per performance which have been derived from the holistic grading process, with the rounded overall grade highlighted in bold:

Table 1 Summary of measurement results (rounded grade/decimal grade).

DEBATE → ACTOR ↓	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Igor Matovič	1 (1.1*) 26.01.2020 (TA3)** C1: 1.0 C2: 1.2	1 (0.9) 02.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 0.8 C2: 1.0	1 (1.4) 23.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 1.6 C2: 1.2	2 (1.7) 26.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 1.7 C2: 1.6
Boris Kollár	1 (1.3) 01.12.2019 (TA3) C1: 1.2 C2: 1.5	1 (1.1) 19.01.2020 (TA3) C1: 1.1 C2: 1.0	1 (0.6) 23.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 0.7 C2: 0.5	1 (1.3) 26.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 1.2 C2: 1.4
Richard Sulík	0 (0.4) 15.12.2019 (RTVS) C1: 0.4 C2: 0.4	0 (0.3) 23.02.2020a (TA3) C1: 0.4 C2: 0.2	0 (0.4) 23.02.2020b (RTVS) C1: 0.4 C2: 0.4	1 (0.6) 26.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 0.8 C2: 0.4
Marián Kotleba	1 (1.2) 19.01.2020 (TA3) C1: 1.4 C2: 0.9	2 (1.7) 02.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 1.8 C2: 1.9	1 (1.4) 23.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 1.4 C2: 1.4	2 (1.6) 26.02.2020 (RTVS) C1: 1.8 C2: 1.4

Source: Authors

* We calculated the mean of both overall decimal grades per one performance $[(C1 + C2)/2]$ and then rounded the resulting mean to 0, 1 or 2 in order to get the final grade

** Date of the debate and the channel it was broadcast on (RTVS – Slovak Radio and Television, TA3 – private news channel)

Each overall grade represents the presence and prominence of populist elements which were identified in actor's discourse produced during their appearance on mediated debates that occurred as a part of the 2020 electoral campaign. We have mostly been interested in the rounded final grade (0, 1, 2) in order to evaluate which performances can be identified as moderately populist (1) or ideally populist (2). Now, we will go through each analysed actor to briefly address some aspects of their discourse in order to answer the research question laid down in the previous section. The findings which are listed below are based on the analysis of the performances by two independent coders and supported by representative quotes.

We first address our non-populist actor selected to test the validity of the measurement method. Three of the four analysed Sulík's performances have not demonstrated the *conditio sine qua non* to be considered even moderately populist. While Sulík has frequently voiced strong anti-elitist appeals, such as in, 'The oligarchs ruled the state, the mafia subjugated the decision-making components of the state to its own will' (23.02.2020b), he mostly refrains from employing inward, people-centric appeals, and his discourse lacks the identification of a 'general people's will', as he does not claim to know what people want, or what they think. His only populist performance (26.02.2020) was graded as such (1) because he claimed to know which solutions are good for 'the people', and which ones

are bad: 'For people who have worked for 40 years and have miserable pensions – this is not a solution!' Sulík also stresses that his party is already prepared to govern and help the people, when he notes that 'We have prepared 100 immediate solutions for the first 100 days of our governance, for employers, and also, 100 solutions for the people' (26.02.2020). Such statement evokes that there are unresolved problems which 'people' as an abstract, unified group are experiencing under the incumbent government, that are in need of an 'immediate' solution. The presence of populist elements in this performance has however been quite latent, with one of the coders even grading this performance as non-populist (0). Still, this particular performance (26.02.2020) was also marked by the presence of openly Manichean language, particularly when Sulík notes that:

We will face a struggle for the future character of our state, a struggle over whether the oligarchs will continue to control our government, whether we will have rampant bureaucracy, present corruption and rotten judiciary, or whether we will live in a country where decency is in vogue, where there is rule of law, where one can invoke his rights because law rules. We offer the latter. (26.02.2020)

In the above quote, it is evident that Sulík demonstrates a dualistic (black and white) understanding of politics in regard to the forthcoming elections and the future of Slovakia, as he clearly does not acknowledge that even in a system with a decent rule of law, corruption, to a certain degree, will always be present. By creating only two possible scenarios on how the country will look after the elections, any middle position is absent, which, according to Hawkins' (2010) conceptualization, would make Sulík's discourse populist. However, all of Sulík's performances, including the moderately populist ones, have also demonstrated strong pragmatism, pluralist understanding of politics, and a focus on narrow issues and concrete data, for example in, 'We have introduced our manifesto with more than 1100 concrete solutions, and one of them specifically deals with our political system ...' (23.02.2020a).

Matovič's performances have all been graded as populist (1), or ideally populist (2). All of his performances therefore demonstrated the essential elements of populist discourse defined by the ideational approach, as people-centeredness and anti-elitism have been both simultaneously present in each of them. Matovič envisions himself as a representative of the ordinary people, who were, according to him, robbed by the previous governments that participated in wide scale corruption activities. The people-centric theme comes through clearly in the 23.02.2020 debate: 'What is most important for me in politics is to work with the people, work for the people and to prevent stealing.' His explicit reference to the 'ordinary people' as an entity has been frequent, and he further specifies that when he (his party) gets to participate in the government, all honest people will be better off while the 'dodgers and cheaters' will be punished. As for the Manichean language, Matovič demonstrated a strong, dualistic perception of politics in Slovakia, when he addresses the people with a mobilisation call, '... let's change this, let's create a country where all honest people would like to live and where bad people will be afraid of being prosecuted and sentenced ...' (26.02.2020). A middle position is clearly absent in this statement and Matovič evidently simplifies the political competition in his country by presenting it as a moral struggle between those who can be labelled as 'honest' opposed to those whom he considers 'dishonest'.

As for the identity of the evil elites, Matovič claims that the key sectors of the state (the judiciary and the healthcare system) are controlled by figures that have connections to organised crime and these individuals have to be removed and replaced in order to create a country where 'ordinary, honest people can feel hope.' In his own words, the system has been subverted by corrupt politicians that have stolen from the people for the last 12 years and requires an immediate change. This has been noted by Matovič during his performance on 23.02.2020, 'The government has willingly handed over our Slovak state, with its key institutions, specifically those which are supposed to secure justice, into the hands of organised crime.' Matovič considers the fight against such corruption as his personal struggle, putting his own life at stake, when he notes on 02.02.2020: 'I have stood against the "evil" without a single policeman, the police controlled by mafia crime syndicates has been after me ...' On several occasions, Matovič envisions himself as a key figure in the fight against corruption in Slovak politics – he even defines this issue as the core political agenda of his party, when he notes during his 26.2.2020 performance that 'Our key programme is the fight against organised crime and corruption, which I have been engaging in for the last 10 years.' Matovič therefore perceives the forthcoming elections not as a competition defined through ideological differences, but rather as a struggle between two antagonistic blocs defined through moral terms: parties which represent the 'ordinary, honest people' versus parties that are formed by 'corrupt politicians' connected to organised crime groups. He appeals to the will of the people and claims that he will stop the looting of the state and the enrichment of the latter group at the expense of the former. His antagonism is therefore mainly directed towards representatives of the former governing coalition, specifically SMER – SD (Direction – Social Democracy). This is summarised in his statement delivered during the last few minutes of the 23.02.2020 debate: 'They [SMER – SD], have been responsible for Slovakia's suffering for long, 12 years.'

Though the elements of populist discourse are certainly present in all analysed Matovič's performances, on a few occasions, we have been able to identify appeals that could be categorised as pluralist. For example, during his performance on 02.02.2020, Matovič states that '... it should not be said that we have one common opinion, as one nation and one entity, because we do not ...' Such a statement clearly presents an anti-populist position, as it acknowledges the existence of justifiable differences in opinions between various political identities. Despite that, Matovič's 02.02.2020 performance has still been graded as moderately populist (1), as it also demonstrates a notable incidence of key populist elements.

When it comes to Kollár, all of his analysed performances have been graded as moderately populist (1), meaning that they demonstrated a simultaneous and consistent presence of both people-centred and anti-elitist appeals. It is also quite evident that Kollár's unmediated connection to 'the people' has been a dominant element of his discourse. He claims that with his political party, We Are Family, he travels through the country, talks to the people on a regular basis and listens to their problems, 'These are not my conditions; these are the conditions of those 5 million people who we talk to on a regular basis. These are not the conditions of Boris Kollár, people demand them!' (19.01.2020). The narrative of 5 million helpless people who are in need of immediate aid from above presents a recurring motive in Kollár's discourse. This is most notably evident in, 'Finally, parties have to come, that will take care of those ordinary 5 million people' (01.12.2020). Object-

ively, a single political party cannot represent the interest of 5 million people in a country of 5.5 million political identities. Yet Kollár also claims that he has entered politics to specifically take care of those ‘unlucky’ 5 million, arguing that ‘People need a party like We Are Family, which would represent ordinary people in the government ...’ (26.02.2020). Without Kollár’s participation in the government, elites will simply remain unresponsive to people’s demands.

The use of language forms such as, ‘people do not want this’, ‘people refuse it’, ‘people are tired of it’ only further demonstrates that Kollár acknowledges (at least through his discourse) the existence of a unified, general people’s will (01.12.2019). Kollár claims to be a direct representative of these people, going even as far as stating that by insulting his party, ‘you are insulting the people which we represent’ – an insult against him, is an insult against the people, thus idealising himself as the personification of the people’s will (19.01.2020).

On the other side of the spectrum, as the evil elite group stand the privatisers and oligarchs who are in control of the system and are, according to Kollár, funding his political adversaries, SMER – SD and the Slovak National Party. Kollár further claims that financial groups led by these oligarchs are abusing the justice and health sectors and are enriching themselves at the expense of the ordinary people: ‘... now, we can see how organised crime has been able to manipulate courts, prosecutors, and reach the highest places’ (23.02.2020). He does not see any positives when it comes to Slovak political elites and throws all previous governments in the same bag stating that ‘Those governments, that have been alternating here, have robbed the people and caused misery’ (19.01.2020).

Apart from these adversaries, Kollár also stands against liberals and the liberal ideology in general, as he argues that the promotion of liberal values, through approval of registered partnerships and adoptions for same sex couples, is disrupting the Slovak cultural tradition. This is most notably evident in his 01.12.2019 performance on TA3 when he notes that ‘We must confront all these liberal efforts to disrupt our traditions and our history ...’ and further adds that ‘... liberals perceive it superficially.’ Kollár also frames the issue of migrants in Slovakia as being part of the liberal agenda and argues that by accepting migrants Slovaks will ‘destroy our culture and our traditions’ (01.12.2019).

Pluralist appeals are very latent in Kollár’s case. The bulk of his non-populist appeals is rather formed by pragmatic arguments, when he, for example, praises international institutions, such as the EU in, ‘[the] European Union is a great project, and we need it; we would go bankrupt without it’ or acknowledges that without EU funding, ‘we would not be able to build a lot of things. These funds helped us to move Slovakia forward, without them, it would not be possible’ (23.02.2021).

Finally, we come to the case of Marián Kotleba. Two of his performances have been graded as populist (1) while the other two were graded as ideally populist (2). What made two of his performances ideally populist (02.02.2020 and 26.02.2020) was his staunch, dualistic framing of particular issues, on which no middle position could be taken and one’s position on the issue would define one’s overall character. This is clearly demonstrated during the 26.02.2020 debate on RTVS, where he notes that, ‘If someone says that the 13th-month pension proposal is some kind of an electoral corruption or looting of the state funds, he is saying this without any respect for his parents, they deserve it!’ The idea that one’s position on a particular proposed policy reflects the quality of relationship with his/

her parents is a textbook example of moralization. The language which Kotleba employed has also been highly bellicose. On one occasion, he referred to a group of protesters as ‘drugged fanatics which the liberal parties are sending to our meetings’ (02.02.2020). During the same debate, he also addresses other party leaders by saying ‘...let’s all stop the progressive evil together’, with the ‘progressive evil’ referring to the liberal-centrist coalition which also took part in the 2020 elections.

As for the notion of ‘the people’ in Kotleba’s discourse, he claims to represent the interest of all ‘vulnerable groups’ of the Slovak society: retirees who struggle with their low pensions, people living in the eastern, poorer regions of the country but also all ordinary people who pay large amounts of taxes but get nothing from the government in return. During his participation on the 23.02.2020 RTVS debate, he claims their party ‘perceive[s] politics as a service to the people, to the nation and not as service to oligarchs.’ Kotleba’s economic proposals also reflect his people-centrism and strong distrust towards business elites when he notes that ‘Instead of giving it to oligarchs, we will return the money to the people, by lowering the value-added tax, and the people will be better off then’ (19.01.2020). Such calls for a more people-oriented income redistribution occur on numerous occasions, also for example in ‘We cannot give money to Brussels first, and only after that give what is left to the people’ (23.02.2020).

It should be noted that when speaking about ordinary people, Kotleba mainly refers to those who adhere to Christianity, nationalism, and conservatism – purported key aspects of his party’s ideology. He notes that ‘... we will continue our fight for a Christian and national Slovakia, regardless of the fact that they will call us extremists or criminalise us’ (02.02.2020). Kotleba perceives his role in politics as a service to people, who have ‘worked honestly’ during their whole lives, now ‘living from hand to mouth’ as the government, according to Kotleba, does not care about ordinary people (19.01.2020).

When it comes to apportioning blame, the list goes on and on. The evil elite is identified with wealthy oligarchs, who have been abusing the system while secretly controlling the governing parties, which are then responsible for the disastrous state of the welfare system, healthcare, and the judiciary. Kotleba claims that his party is the only party ‘not soaked in corruption’ and that the existing, disastrous situation should be blamed on ‘all other political parties’ (19.01.2020). Kotleba is critical towards both ‘traditional parties’, when he notes that ‘all these traditional parties have been looting and destroying ... and Matovič’s party has not been an exception’ but also speaks negatively about candidates that describe themselves as ‘new’: ‘Politicians, who took part in privatisation, took part in looting of our national property are presenting themselves as new politicians today’ (02.02.2020). This clear distinction drawn between ‘us’ and ‘other parties’ is also evident in Kotleba’s claim that ‘Since 1993, all governments have been doing the same thing; raising our national debt, opening up social inequalities and subordinating Slovakia to the will of foreign masters’ (26.02.2020).

It also became increasingly evident that Kotleba attempts to distance himself from liberalism and its moral and political attributes, refusing to cooperate with any political party that could be categorised as ‘liberal,’ for example in the 23.02.2020 RTVS debate: ‘We are the only party that will not form a government with these fanatic liberals and the only party which can protect Slovakia from the liberal devastation which we can see in Western Europe ...’

Thus, another group of conspiring elites which Kotleba identifies as evil are the liberal parties who, according to Kotleba, are working in tandem with various NGOs, with the aim of spreading the 'liberal agenda' across Slovak primary and secondary schools, most notably during the 26.02.2020 RTVS debate: 'Mainly because, today, our high schools but also primary schools are under the influence of malignant, anti-Slovak, anti-national, anti-Christian NGOs, who often directly interfere with the teaching process ...'

International entities are also subjected to harsh criticism. NATO is considered to be a 'terrorist, criminal organization' (02.02.2020). The EU is blamed for 'pushing migrants inside our borders' and for 'propagating gender ideology' (23.02.2020). Kotleba criticises the former establishment for having '... enough money to pay protection rackets to the European Union' but not being able to find money for the retirees (23.02.2020). The press is also attacked, when Kotleba describes the editors of one journal as 'tabloid rats' (02.02.2020). Overall, it can be said that Kotleba's discourse has been the most antagonistic of all four analysed actors, as his list of evil elites who are working against the interest of the Slovak people is the most comprehensive one. We were not able to identify any openly pragmatist/pluralist statements delivered by Kotleba in the analysed corpus.

Overall, we can see a consistent populist performance in cases of Boris Kollár, Igor Matovič, and Marián Kotleba with one and two extremely populist performances from the latter two politicians, respectively. We now turn to discussing these findings and summarizing the main outcomes of our research.

8 Discussion

We can now claim that populism, defined as a specific type of discourse through the ideational approach, has been present in the performances of three Slovak party leaders (Matovič, Kollár, Kotleba), who were previously identified as populist in the academic literature. Each performance of these three actors had at least the notion of the people/unified will and the notion of the evil elite present. As for the similarities, it is clear that these three actors have claimed that they represent the ordinary people, while also demonstrating a staunch interest in the improvement of the social status of those that are worse off financially. Matovič, Kotleba, and Kollár have also explicitly stated that the government should be formed in such a way, that it will reflect an abstract, unified 'will of the people'. The idea that politics should be perceived as a 'service to the people' features prominently in the discourse of all three alleged populist actors. Each one of them also framed the previous governments as corrupt and unresponsive to people's needs, each promising change once in power. The idea of a necessity for some kind of a 'revolution through elections' which will make these 'pro-people' movements part of the government, so they finally get the opportunity to deliver electoral promises made to the 'ordinary people,' could also be identified in the discourse of each analysed actor. All analysed actors thus presented themselves as a reasonable alternative to the incumbent power holders, which bears logic due to their prolonged status of political opposition within the power structure.

When it comes to the notion of the evil elite, each analysed actor has framed the corrupt politicians, oligarchs, and financial groups as a part of a larger 'scheme' responsible

for the detrimental situation in the country. The blame has been often directly attributed to long-governing SMER – SD and its coalition partners, who have been condemned for allowing organised crime and ‘shady’ interest groups to penetrate the executive, as a means of self-enrichment and power usurpation. With some members of the executive being openly accused of their personal connections to the mob, these corrupt governments have been described as unresponsive to people’s demands, often incapable of resolving the country’s problems. Such verbal attacks were prominent even in performances that have been graded as non-populist (as in the case of Richard Sulík). Furthermore, two of the analysed actors (Kollár and Kotleba) also framed ‘liberal’ parties and the ‘liberal agenda’ as dangerous or harmful to the interest of the Slovak people and their ‘traditional culture’. When it comes to anti-EU sentiment, its presence has been observed only in the discourse of Marián Kotleba, who, on numerous occasions, constructed a narrative of ‘evil Brussels’ elites’ who are ‘imposing’ their agenda on the Slovak people, often against their will. Three debate performances, Matovič (26.02.2020) and Kotleba (02.02.2020, 26.02.2020), have been graded as extremely populist (2) due to the presence of an explicitly Manichean framing in their discourse, accompanied by the use of emotionally charged, often offensive language, or even the demonization of political opponents (in addition to the essential populist people/elite dichotomy).

As for the presence of pluralist, non-populist appeals, these have been observed in the discourse of two ‘allegedly’ populist actors – Kollár and Matovič – being demonstrated in Kollár’s respect for the EU as an international organisation and Matovič’s acknowledgment that the plurality of opinions should be considered natural in a democratic society. Such narratives indicate that even politicians who have been generally qualified as populist may employ non-populist, or openly anti-populist appeals in their narratives, supporting the idea that populism – operationalized as a type of discursive style – should be perceived as ‘an attribute of the message and not the speaker’ (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016, p. 19). Thus, in order to avoid excessive normativeness, we should not be too quick to attribute the quality of being ‘populist’ to ‘particular parties or leaders’ and rather use this ambiguous adjective to describe ‘particular actions and policy proposals’ of these actors (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2009, p. 822),

However, when it comes to the presence of the key populist elements defined through the ideational approach, it can be said that the discourse of the three allegedly populist actors demonstrated more similarities than differences, as all of them have been able to develop a consistent populist narrative throughout their performances – that of the ordinary people and their will positioned against the corrupt power bloc and its selfish interests.

9 Conclusion

After conducting and evaluating the measurement process, we can claim that Hawkins’ (2009) method of ‘holistic grading’ has been able to identify the key elements of populist discourse in the performances of Slovak party leaders. While this measurement method has been so far mostly employed on manifestos and speeches, it has now proven to be also useful in analysing mediated discourse delivered as a part of televised debates. All three

actors that have been previously described as populist by academia have received an overall grade per performance of 1 or higher. This means that the discourse produced by these actors, delivered as a part of the electoral debates, featured an idea of a unified popular will in confrontation with an evil, conspiring elite. The discourse of these actors can therefore be considered populist and their description as such by scholars seems adequate. Still, discrepancies between academic definitions and popular use of the concept may exist and are very likely. In the case of our analysis however, these three actors (Matovič, Kollár, Kotleba) partially 'deserve' the label assigned to them by scholars, as far as the empirical findings derived from our analysis are concerned, with the caveat that we focused on their particular messages and discursive styles, which also evinced an occasional pluralist stance from some of them. In line with our research question, we have shown that three of the four analysed actors demonstrated elements of populist discourse in their performances. However, we have analysed only a relatively short time frame of performances. Our findings are limited and may be challenged by new data. We acknowledge there might be cases of performances where these actors do not demonstrate any populist elements. Further research might establish a solid claim regarding the attribute of 'being populist'.

The use of Hawkins' (2009) holistic grading method on speech acts of politicians from different regions allows for cross country comparison in terms of populist elements present in their rhetoric. Furthermore, this allows for the interpretation of the impact that contextual factors of a particular region may have on the narratives produced by local populist actors. Such quantitative representation of the presence and prominence of populist elements in a particular speech act may also provide insight into the development that certain actors can undergo in terms of their rhetoric under the influence of various factors. Do politicians become less populist once they win the election and successfully enter the executive? Do they become more populist in times of temporary crisis? These are just several hypotheses discussed in the current academic debate on populism, which could be answered by the use of a systematic method similar to the one employed in our work. Overall, we are confident that more insight may be obtained in populism studies from the process of empirically capturing and then quantitatively representing the degree of populist elements in actors' discourse.

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Analysed TV debates (date, channel, format)

- 01. 12. 2019, TA3, electoral discussion
- 19. 01. 2020, TA3, electoral discussion
- 26. 01. 2020, TA3, electoral discussion
- 02. 02. 2020, RTVS, electoral discussion
- 23. 02. 2020, RTVS, leaders' debate
- 26. 02. 2020, RTVS, leaders' debate