

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine in the Slovak Political Discourse

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Abstract

This paper focuses on analyzing how the war in Ukraine is presented in political discourse after February 2022, i.e., after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The aim is to identify the main discursive strategies of Slovak political actors. We are interested in the answer to the question of how politicians name, characterize, and evaluate the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The analysis is methodologically based on critical discourse analysis. In our research, we observe how elements of solidarity, security concerns, and national frameworks intersect in the language of the political elite. Attention is also paid to the differences between pragmatic and populist approaches to aid for Ukraine. The results show that the war in Ukraine is an issue that divides Slovak society into pro-Western and pro-Eastern camps, with the current ruling coalition representing a group of political actors with a strongly positive inclination not only towards Russia but also towards authoritarian forms of government.

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine has changed the security situation on the European continent, and many analysts were surprised by the Russian invasion. However, the first act of aggression did not begin in February 2022, but with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. According to Jaroslav Ušiak (2024: 11), "Russian aggression sparked discussions about the need for deeper integration in the area of security and defense in order to ensure collective responses to external threats and strengthen the sense of belonging among the V4 countries." The discussion was soon extended to issues of security for the entire European Union and the world. This conflict has significantly changed the security situation on the European continent and has also influenced politi-

cal discourse in EU member states. The issues have been taken up by populist entities whose communication strategies are based on spreading fear.

In Slovakia, the war in Ukraine regularly features in political discourse (Štefančík et al., 2023). Government representatives (since 2023) have expressed a positive relationship with the Russian Federation, indicating positive attitudes towards authoritarian forms of government.

The war in Ukraine is therefore the main topic of this conference paper. It aims to identify the main discursive strategies of Slovak political actors regarding events in Slovakia's eastern neighbor. We are interested in how politicians name, characterize, and evaluate this event. The analysis is methodologically based on critical discourse analysis. In our research, we observe how elements of solidarity, security concerns, and national frameworks intersect in the language of the political elite. Attention is also paid to the differences between pragmatic and populist approaches to the topic under study.

The analysis is methodologically based on critical discourse analysis. This research approach is used to reveal the relationships between language, power, ideology, and society (Cingerová & Dulebová, 2019). The main contribution of this method is that it is not just about what is said, but also about how and why it is said in this way, and about the consequences it has for social reality (Wodak, 2014). In our research, we examine how elements of solidarity, security concerns, and national frameworks intersect in the language of political elites. Attention is also paid to the differences between pragmatic and populist approaches to aid for Ukrainian refugees.

Putin's "Special military operation" in political communication

The Russian attack on Kyiv, which was originally supposed to last a few days but has now been going on for more than three years, took not only international relations analysts by surprise, but also politicians, including the Slovak political elite. This is evidenced by statements from Slovak politicians who did not entertain the idea that Russia could start a war in Ukraine, even though Russia had been waging a form of hybrid warfare (Baluk & Perepelytsia, 2024) in Ukraine since 2014.

– *"President Vladimir Putin is clearly the only one who wants to save peace in Europe. Let's keep our fingers crossed for him"*
(Blaha, L. 2022, cited according to Šnídl 2024).

This vice-chairman of the Smer-SD political party is not making rational statements reflecting his knowledge of international politics, but instead articulating messages based on ideology, Russian propaganda, and uncritical admiration for authoritarian regimes and their leaders.¹ Some politicians, including this one, use various forms of polarization to mobilize voters. The problem is that they are largely unaware of the consequences of polarization for society. This is manifested, among other things, by the vulgarization of voters' language on social networks, which is also the subject of research by Slovak linguists (Orgoňová & Bohunická, 2016).

At the time of the military invasion, the ruling coalition comprised pro-European parties and those clearly supporting NATO membership. Although all political parties, including the populist ones, condemned the invasion as a violation of international law, there was no ulterior motive in the government parties' communication to appeal to pro-Russian voters. They expressed their unequivocal criticism and rejection of the invasion. President Zuzana Čaputová also expressed a similarly dismissive attitude towards Russia's war in Ukraine:

- *"Russian imperialism must be stopped"* (Heger, E. 2022a, cited according to The Slovak Spectator).
- *"We should not be intimidated by Russia"* (Heger, E. 2022b, cited according to The Slovak Spectator).
- *"I strongly condemn the illegal aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. I express my full support and solidarity with the Ukrainian people, as well as the country's leadership and President Zelensky"* (Čaputová, Z. 2022, cited according to Duleba 2023: 123).
- *"I strongly condemn the military aggression of the Russian Federation against the sovereign state of Ukraine. I consider it an unacceptable, unjustifiable, and unprecedented step. It is a flagrant violation of international law and the territorial integrity of our neighbor"* (Kollár, Z. 2022, cited according to Duleba 2023: 123).

In the quoted statements of the three highest Slovak constitutional officials from 2022, Russia is linguistically constructed as an unambiguous aggressor and threat, with the use of terms such as *"Russian imperialism,"* *"illegal aggression"* and *"flagrant violation of international law"* creates a morally powerful framework condemning the violation of Ukraine's territory.

¹ In addition to Vladimir Putin, he also presents positive relations with communists such as the last communist president of Czechoslovakia, Gustáv Husák, and Cuban guerrilla leader Ernesto Guevara.

rial integrity and sovereignty. Ukraine and its people are presented in the quoted statements as an innocent and suffering community that deserves solidarity and support. The language of the political elites is explicit, value-laden, and deliberately rejects the neutral stance often called for by representatives of the opposition at the time. All three constitutional officials appeal to moral and legal principles, in particular the protection of sovereignty and compliance with international law.

From a discursive perspective, the statements of all three public officials represent Slovakia's moral and value-based stance within the Western democratic community. These are political messages aimed at strengthening collective identity as a society in solidarity with the victims of the Russian military invasion. In this way, Slovak political representatives sought to present the Slovak Republic as a responsible, value-based actor in Western European civilizational structures, as a subject of international law that responds to military conflict in accordance with European humanistic traditions.

The policy of Eduard Heger's government at the time was not only to provide humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees heading to or through Slovakia, but the Slovak government also supported Ukraine militarily. According to Alexander Duleba (2023: 132), "from the beginning of the Russian aggression until the end of November 2022, more than a million Ukrainian war refugees had crossed the Slovak-Ukrainian border." In the first weeks after the invasion, public opinion was inclined toward humanitarian aid for Ukrainians. However, even at that time, critical and disparaging statements about Ukrainian refugees were already appearing in some sections of society (Štefančík, Bilíková & Goloschuk, 2023). These statements served as the basis for critical, even radical, positions, especially on the populist end of the Slovak party system.

Opposition politicians at the time were particularly opposed to military aid to Ukraine. In accordance with international law, the Slovak government decided to provide military equipment to Ukraine, including the S-300 anti-aircraft and anti-missile defense system and, later, old MiG-29 fighter jets. However, some politicians viewed the aid to Ukraine critically, even calling it treason:

– *“Handing over our only and last S-300 air defense system to Ukraine would be treason on the part of Heger’s government”* (Uhrík, M. FB, 2022).

– *“He is sending weapons to Ukraine, which end up in the hands of fascist units. This is in direct contrast to our anti-fascist national tradition. It is a betrayal of our national interests”* (Blaha, L., FB, 2022).

In the statements made by opposition politicians at the time, we can identify the creation of linguistic opposition between the categories of "us" (Slovakia, nation, society) vs. "them" (government, traitors, Ukraine, West). Heger's government, Ukraine, and its president are referred to in a negative, accusatory manner, while Uhrík and Blaha position themselves as moral defenders of national interests and identity. Uhrík uses the strongly value-laden term treason, which is historically associated with the concept of national loyalty and betrayal of the state. Blaha extends this framework to include an ideological dimension—he links support for Ukraine to "fascist units" — and creates a contrast between the current government's policy and the "anti-fascist national tradition," thereby attempting to legitimize the rejection of military aid through a moral appeal to historical continuity.

Creating a dichotomous opposition between "us" and "them" is a typical communicative feature of populism. According to Marián Sekerák (2020: 67), populism "works effectively with symbols, mostly verbal ones, within the discursive construction of reality." However, it is also important to note that the interests of the elite (in this case, the government of Eduard Heger) are opposed to the interests of the majority of the people, or even threaten them. The opposition, led by Smer-SD, often argued that the decision to provide military assistance to Ukraine was "*direct intervention by Slovakia in the war with Russia*" and that "*the government was endangering the security of Slovakia's citizens.*" The thesis about Slovakia's involvement in the war is a way for populists to stir up fear. Fear has proven to be an effective means of mobilizing voters and legitimizing unpopular decisions (Dutkiewicz, Kazarinova, 2017). When people are afraid, they are motivated to engage in certain social behaviors (such as higher voter turnout) or to respect decisions that they might not otherwise agree with.

Opposition politicians presented Heger's government as treacherous, immoral, and illegitimate. At the same time, Slovakia was implicitly understood as a victim of foreign manipulation and a defender of "true" national and pro-Slavic values. The argumentation strategies of both statements are populist: evil is defined through betrayal and violation of national traditions, while good is personified in certain political parties (Smer-SD, Republika) as representatives of the "true nation." This approach is strongly pro-national, anti-Western, and anti-establishment, with language that is radicalized, expressive, and polarizing. Terms such as *treason*, *betrayal of national interests*, and *fascist units* function as discursive weapons designed to emotionally mobilize the audience and create the impression of an existential threat to national integrity. This approach corresponds to the characteristics of the language of right-wing extremism (Štefančík, 2020).

After the Change of Government in 2023

The above-described polarization on the topic of the war in Ukraine persisted in Slovak political discourse even after the 2023 elections, but with one important change. The actors in political discourse changed their approach to power. Opposition parties became coalition parties, and coalition parties became opposition parties. Some parties, including the party of former Prime Minister Eduard Heger, failed to gain seats in parliament, and Eduard Heger moved to the margins of political discourse. After the 2023 parliamentary elections, the government was formed by three political parties: Smer-SD, Hlas, and the Slovak National Party. Although Smer-SD and SNS are still labeled "populist" parties, their decisions regarding Ukraine are also pragmatic. Although Robert Fico's government promised to stop military aid to Ukraine, it supported arms exports on a commercial basis. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, Slovak arms exports have increased tenfold by the end of 2024 (Haluza, 2025).

Since the 2023 elections, Robert Fico has been talking about foreign policy in all four directions, as evidenced by several meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and representatives of the Ukrainian government. Fico's rhetoric is critical to radical in relation to Ukraine, and he also criticizes the European Union and EU member states for helping Ukraine, which, according to Fico, prolongs the war and turns the EU into a war cabinet.

– "I have always maintained that the EU has turned into a war cabinet, that a significant portion of EU member states support the war in Ukraine in the naive belief that this will weaken and ultimately defeat Russia. It is paradoxical, but typical of the EU's impotent foreign policy, that some EU leaders are already pushing for a summit in Budapest, as is the case with the presence of the Ukrainian president" (Fico, R., cited according to Extra plus, 2025).

The statement by the Slovak Prime Minister is an example of typical anti-Ukrainian and anti-European rhetoric, which is based on delegitimizing European institutions and solidarity with Ukraine. In it, the EU is framed as a "war cabinet" – an institution that has lost its peaceful essence and become an aggressive actor. This is a strongly negative metaphor intended to undermine the moral standing of the European community. In Robert Fico's language, European Union leaders are devalued by being described as those who are *"pushing for a summit in Budapest."* This expression carries a pejorative, disparaging undertone, suggesting servility and opportunism. Fico is

intensifying polarization by constructing an opposition between a "sensible Slovakia" with a self-confident foreign policy and a "naive and impotent EU." His statement is not only pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian, but also contributes to the discrediting of the EU as a community that acts contrary to the interests of its member states. Similar narratives have appeared in the past in communications from Slovak right-wing extremists (Štefančík, 2020).

SNS chairman Andrej Danko sometimes presents himself as more radical than Prime Minister Robert Fico. He is more critical and radical in his assessment of Ukraine.

– *"Ukraine is a security risk. It cannot join the EU now or in the future. If it joins the European Union, it will want to join NATO"* (Danko, A., 2025).

Andrej Danko's communication, as chairman of the coalition party, is a typical example of anti-Ukrainian, Eurosceptic rhetoric that presents Ukraine as a threat rather than a victim of military aggression. The very term "*security risk*" has a stigmatizing effect. It is a speech act of exclusion with a negative attitude towards Ukraine and its efforts to integrate into European and transatlantic structures. Danko rejects Ukraine's sovereign political and democratizing ambitions, but attributes potentially dangerous intentions to it. The argument is based on a threat scenario in which Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO is interpreted as a danger. Andrej Danko's perspective is clearly pro-Russian and Eurosceptic, as evidenced by a number of other statements analyzed in the professional literature. According to Danko, the EU is implicitly portrayed as an institution that would cause problems for its own member states by accepting Ukraine. Although the SNS chairman's language in this case is factual and not radicalized, it ideologically carries strong geopolitical sympathies for authoritarian Russia. By rejecting Ukraine's integration ambitions, Andrej Danko legitimizes a pro-Russian stance on the war.

The representatives of the current opposition parties articulate a completely different stance on Ukraine than the ruling coalition. At the beginning of 2025, the chairman of the strongest opposition party, Michal Šimečka, personally traveled to Kyiv, where he met with the Ukrainian president. This visit followed a war of words between the Slovak prime minister and Ukrainian President Zelensky. With his visit, Šimečka showed that he is committed to good relations between Slovakia and Ukraine:

– "We have important negotiations ahead of us. Our goal is clear—to reopen the door that Robert Fico slammed shut with his aggressive attacks" (Šimečka, M., cited according to Katuška, 2025).

Similar views, supporting the victim of aggression, are also expressed by other parties of the current opposition:

– "We will achieve lasting and just peace through security guarantees and strong security cooperation, not through Ukraine's capitulation and the spread of conspiracy theories, as the coalition is doing" (KDH, 2025).

This approach is pragmatic and follows the conciliatory policy of the former government during the 2020-2023 election period. Opposition parties criticize the ruling coalition for its views on the war in Ukraine, portraying Slovakia as an untrustworthy country within the EU, where the clear majority has a clear idea of who is the aggressor and who is the victim in this war. On the contrary, opposition parties are aligning themselves with the positions of the European Union's strong players, which may be an advantage once the war ends and discussions begin on how to participate in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine:

– "It will be important for Slovakia to participate in the reconstruction of Ukraine" (Majerský, M., cited according to SITA, 2025).

Conclusion

The Slovak government coalition's communication on the war in Ukraine is currently characterized by an ambivalent approach. On the one hand, we see significant skepticism towards supporting Kyiv and an openly pro-Russian stance. Not only Robert Fico, but also other representatives of Smer-SD and SNS regularly visit Russia and generally present the country from a positive perspective. They regularly express concerns and present Russia as a threat, even though there is already debate in the literature about Russia's gradual loss of influence in international politics (Scepanovic, 2024) precisely because of its unsuccessful three-day "special military operation." Despite this, Robert Fico meets with the President of the Russian Federation, Smer-SD Vice-Chairman Ľuboš Blaha meets with the head of the Russian secret service, and MP Richard Glück, for example, appeared on Russian state television in October 2025, which is considered one of the main tools of

Kremlin propaganda. On the other hand, Robert Fico, albeit sometimes adopting a blackmailing approach, supports anti-Russian sanctions at the European Union level, and his government's 2023 program statement mentions respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Coalition representatives emphasize the need for "peace negotiations" and reject further military supplies to Ukraine, even though Slovakia's military equipment shipments to Ukraine have increased significantly since the new government took office. According to the governing coalition, Slovakia should not be "*dragged into a foreign war*", with responsibility for the escalation of the conflict being shifted not only to Russia but also to Western countries and the EU itself, which the prime minister considers a "war cabinet." This communication strategy uses elements of conspiracy theories, which are quite popular in Slovakia (Spálová & Mikuláš, 2023). The European Union is portrayed as an institution that acts against the interests of its member states. At the same time, Russia is implicitly seen as a partner with whom good, rational relations must be maintained, as it is one of the leading suppliers of gas and oil to Slovakia. The language of government representatives is emotional, polarizing, and appeals to national sovereignty, mobilizing voters through fear of war and the economic consequences of sanctions.

In contrast to the coalition, the opposition's discourse is represented mainly by the Progressive Slovakia, SaS, KDH, and non-parliamentary Democrats parties. These politicians base their positions on the need for solidarity, democracy, and international law. Opposition politicians emphasize that Slovakia must remain part of the pro-Western community and support Ukraine as a victim of Russian military aggression. The opposition's language is based on arguments of moral responsibility, the defense of democratic principles, and the need for unified action by the EU and NATO. Their language is more analytical and less emotional, but is often disparaged by the government camp as "anti-people." The result is a polarizing conflict in which the ruling coalition uses populist rhetoric to question Western norms and values. At the same time, the opposition seeks to defend them by appealing to the values and principles of liberal democracy and, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the fundamental right to defend oneself against an aggressor.

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