Speaking Migration: How Populists and Institutions Frame the Same Issue

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Abstract

In populist discourse, migration is generally presented as an undesirable phenomenon, and migrants as a threat. This is also how Slovak populist parties present migration. If populists come to power, their rhetoric may change. This text deals with the creation of migration policy at a time when populists are part of the governing coalition. My reasoning assumes that the language of policy differs from that of politics. While the language of politics contains various emotionally charged expressions, similar means of expression are absent from the language of policy. I attempt to verify this assumption by analyzing the outputs related to the formation of Slovak migration policy. While the language of politics is emotionally charged and its main purpose is to persuade, the language of policy is factual and informative.

Introduction

According to Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 321) "political scientists and political actors frequently refer to populism to characterise certain political phenomena or brand competitors in a political conflict." In the language of extremists and populists, migration is one of the central political issues (Huysmans, 2000; Stojarová, 2018; Štefančík, 2020). Populists present migrants as a threat to the domestic population. This approach is pragmatic, as anti-immigration policies can easily provoke fear and anxiety among the population towards that which is foreign, new, and unknown. Fear is considered an important mobilizing factor in social behavior (Seresová, 2018).

Shifts in populist communication strategies may occur if populists come to power and representatives of domestic employers consider migrants an

acceptable solution to labor shortages (Liďák & Štefančík, 2020). In such cases, there is a discrepancy between the views presented by populist parties and reality. Despite strong anti-immigration rhetoric, the number of migrants in the country is growing.

The reason for this contradiction may be employers' interests, but also, for example, respect for the right of already settled migrants to family reunification. This text deals with the existence of migration policy during the populist government. I am interested in whether populist communication strategies are considered in the creation of migration policy, or, conversely, whether it is possible to identify employers' interest in allowing foreigners to be active in the domestic labor market.

I will seek answers to these questions through a content analysis of the document defining the basic principles of Slovak migration policy. In the section on populist language, I draw on my previous research, so I will not quote directly from political statements in the sources mentioned.

Migration in the language of populists

In the literature, we encounter various views on populists. Populism is predominantly defined as an ideology, political style, or form of political communication (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Schaefer, 2020). The latter approach is also used in this text, which examines the communicative level of populism with an emphasis on its linguistic and stylistic features.

The language of populists in discussions about migration is often emotionally charged, with them using various linguistic devices to elicit negative reactions from recipients toward the object of their criticism. These include hyperbole, vulgarisms, dehumanizing expressions, adjectives referring to skin color, and communication strategies such as dramatization and conspiracy theories, hoaxes, or outright lies with the aim of deliberately manipulating the way recipients will react (Ižák, 2023; Dulebová & Krajčovičová, 2018). The measures are presented as an interest in protecting the people (the nation, the populace) from a pervasive threat from abroad. This logic fits into the horizontal concept of the ideological core of populism (Klein 2012) in the sense of us vs. them, or us vs. foreigners (Smolík & Đorđević, 2020; Spišiaková & Keresty, 2024).

Among Slovak populist political parties that mobilize voters on the issue of international migration are Smer-SD, SNS, and Republika. Two of them are in the governing coalition after the 2023 parliamentary elections (Smer-SD and SNS), and the chairman of Smer-SD is the Slovak prime minister for the fourth time. Although SNS had already attempted to raise certain is-

sues related to migration (mainly from Muslim countries) in the past, this topic only entered Slovak political discourse after 2015 in the context of migration processes on the European continent. Since then, Slovak populists have presented migrants as a threat with political, cultural, and economic dimensions, as well as a personal dimension, as some populists consider migrants to be potential terrorists or carriers of foreign diseases. Conflictual or even confrontational language polarizes society (Cingerová & Dulebová, 2019), manipulates (Demčišák & Fraštíková, 2021), and provokes fear, anger, or frustration, which increases people's engagement and encourages their willingness to act according to the populist agenda or at least to respect the decisions of populists in a particular political area.

In populist discourse, the term "immigrant" usually refers to a person from a culturally and religiously different background. In 2015 and 2016, the topic of "illegal" migration was often reduced to membership of a religious community, specifically Islam, but this is not only the case in Slovak discourse. In populist perception, Islam is a symbolic image of "foreignness" that threatens the homogeneous domestic society with a foreign culture and, at the same time, an image of violent foreign power (Hartleb, 2018). In Slovakia, part of the population may have the idea that Islam is a violent religion that is incompatible with the Christian faith (Letavajová, 2018). Since, according to populists, immigrants are bearers of different cultural customs, they are presented as a threat to domestic culture and national identity. They thus offer simplified answers to the question of how Christian Europe and Christian Slovakia should respond to the growing population of Muslims, which threatens the survival of the nation or Western or Western European civilization. Part of this discourse is the political myth that homogeneous national communities once existed and can be restored if migration from culturally and religiously different countries is eliminated or completely stopped (Huysmans, 2000).

In populist rhetoric, migrants are unwilling to integrate, resulting in the creation of closed immigrant communities and higher crime rates among immigrants, who may threaten not only national and cultural identity but also personal safety. This narrative was present in 2015 and 2016, as well as before the 2023 elections. A few weeks before the parliamentary elections, irregular migrants gathered near the Hungarian border, which some populists exploited for their own election campaign. Migration once again became the focus of political discourse for several weeks. As is usually the case in Slovakia, the formation of Robert Fico's fourth government was followed by measures to eliminate illegal border crossings with Hungary. After a few weeks, the issue was once again on the margins of political discourse.

Politicians presented migrants differently after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Initially, the discourse was dominated by appeals for solidarity with war refugees. The term "departed" even appeared in political and administrative language, as if to deliberately replace the long-stigmatized terms "migrant" or "refugee." If anything was typical of the discourse to date, it was the shift in the neutral meaning of the terms "migrant" and "refugee." The term refugee even had a significantly more positive connotation, as it could evoke sympathy or a need to help someone whose life or health was at risk. After 2015, the meanings of both terms shifted from neutral to negative connotations. Politicians often presented refugees as "economic migrants" who did not need help. At the same time, one of the main reasons for their departure from their country of origin was the use of social assistance tools in countries with consistent social assistance and justice policies. For these reasons, the value-neutral term "departed" appeared after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Despite the sense of solidarity and willingness to help, negative opinions began to emerge immediately after the arrival of the first war refugees (Štefančík et al., 2023). Right-wing extremists in particular presented the view that there are also migrants from African countries among the Ukrainians who are not concerned with security. Right-wing extremists pointed to some migrants who actually came from African countries, but these were usually foreign students from Ukrainian universities.

Although Robert Fico, after forming his fourth government, expressed the view that Ukrainian migrants can work in the Slovak labor market, extremely critical, vulgar, and derogatory comments about Ukrainian refugees appear mainly on social networks. This critical approach to Ukrainian migrants may be based on a positive attitude towards Vladimir Putin's regime in Moscow, as is evident in the fourth government's foreign policy under Robert Fico.

Language of migration policy

When assessing migration policy, I refer to the document "*Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a View to 2025*," published by the Slovak Ministry of the Interior and still used as a guideline today. The Slovak government approved this document on September 8, 2021. It approved this document at a time when Smer-SD was in opposition and SNS was outside parliament. Since the change of government, the ruling coalition has not presented a new document, thereby confirming the validity of the current document. The introduction states that the document builds on the philosophy

of the previous document from 2011, the year when the Smer-SD party was again in opposition and migration policy was approved by a center-right government. Although the Smer-SD party is highly critical in its statements on migration, between 2011 and autumn 2025, it did not prepare its own document revising the resolutions adopted by other governments. Therefore, existing documents cannot reflect the critical, even hostile, rhetoric that these parties usually use to present their positions on migration.

A positive aspect of this document is that it mentions integration, as this topic is absent from Slovak political discourse, even though integration is a fundamental prerequisite for the harmonious coexistence of members of the indigenous society with migrants (Seresová & Štefančík, 2024). The document states that "*integration is an essential tool for a successful migration policy, and it is a continuous, long-term, and dynamic two-way process of mutual respect and reciprocal recognition of the rights and obligations of all residents*" (MV, 2021). The integration policy of the Slovak Republic is based on a model that requires compliance with Slovak legislation and respect for Slovak cultural realities and traditions. It also requires migrants to learn Slovak, as this is a key tool for successful integration.

The document clearly shows that the state distinguishes between legal and illegal migration, although opinions are already appearing in specialist literature that the term "illegal migration" is not politically correct. The division between legal and illegal migration corresponds to the statements of the current Prime Minister, Robert Fico, on the subject of migration. While the current government maintains a strictly negative stance on illegal migration, it views legal migration as a potential solution to labor shortages in certain sectors of the national economy. This approach is emphasized in the interest of "*a dimension of regulated labor mobility that will prevent social, economic, and environmental tensions and will be based on an emphasis on preserving the security of the Slovak Republic and the rights of Slovak citizens, as well as the rights of foreigners residing in the territory of the Slovak Republic*" (MV 2021). This wording clearly states the intention to exploit the economic potential of migration, but with certain restrictions. The document also addresses illegal migration. In 2021, the government committed itself to taking humanitarian considerations into account and providing protection to those who need it. At the same time, however, it is interested in limiting abuse of the asylum procedure.

Looking at the language level of this government document, a formal style prevails. The text is rich in technical terms. The document is informative in nature with elements of administrative style typical of public administration. Stylistically, the text is consistent, without significant deviations, and avoids emotional or expressive language characteristic of the political

level. We identify technical nouns, abstract expressions, and technical formulations that support the formality and professionalism of the document.

The text contains long and complex sentences typical of legal and strategic documents. The vocabulary is rich in technical terms from the fields of migration, international law, security and public policy, asylum procedures, and integration policy. The language used is functional, without unnecessary embellishments, and the document consistently avoids colloquial or informal expressions. The text does not contain figurative expressions, metaphors, or hyperbole; it is not subject to dramatization; and it lacks stylistic devices, which correspond to its primary goal of informing and determining policy content in a specific area.

Conclusion

The above insight into two different spheres of political language explains the difference between *politics* and *policy*. In the migration discourse, this difference is evident in the comparison between the language of political processes, including political struggle (politics), and that of substantive policy outcomes (policy). The language of politics appears in campaigns, media debates, and statements in which politicians use evaluative and emotional formulations to mobilize the public and legitimize their positions — for example, "*we must protect our borders from illegal migrants*" or "*refugees threaten our social systems*." This is language influenced by ideology, which constructs a boundary between "us" and "them," or "the others" and "the strangers." While the language of politics serves to persuade and maintain power, the language of policy serves to regulate and implement decisions. Both levels of politics create interconnected planes. While the language of politics serves to persuade and maintain power, the language of policy serves to regulate and implement decisions. Both levels of politics create interconnected levels of discourse: the first frames how migration is discussed, and the second shapes how it is acted upon in its context. The first form of language is emotionally charged and persuasive, while the second is factual and informative.

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