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## SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION AFTER RUSSIA'S MILITARY INVASION OF UKRAINE


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This paper aims to explain how the Slovak public perceived migrants coming to Slovakia from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war. Like other countries neighbouring Ukraine, Slovak state institutions have had to deal with issues related to the migration of Ukrainian refugees. In addition to spontaneous aid, negative attitudes towards refugees have also appeared in the public debate since the beginning of the war. Using the method of discourse analysis, this paper examines the formation of opinions on Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia since February 24, 2022. This paper confirms that, as in 2015 and 2016, during the debate on the migration situation, opinions about refugees as a potential threat to the domestic population continued to emerge. These negative messages were mainly presented by representatives of the far right and far left, who are usually characterised by a positive attitude towards Russia and a negative attitude towards the US.<sup>4</sup>


Key words: securitization, war, far right, far left, migration, integration, populism, Slovakia

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The large number of refugees arriving in Slovakia from Ukraine in 2022 was one of the consequences of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Most of the Ukrainian refugees went to Europe via Poland (Varpina and Fredheim, 2022), and some have found protection in Slovakia. The Slovak Republic thus experienced the largest migration wave in its modern history. Yet, Slovakia was not a typical immigration country until this period, even though the number of migrants living in Slovakia has gradually increased since 2004 (Letavajová et al., 2020).

*„The sudden and rapid growth of Ukrainian migration has been facilitated by the availability of safe exit options, a welcoming attitude in Europe, and an existing culture of migration“* (Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022). Similarly, the overwhelming majority of the Slovak public reacted positively to the refugees from Ukraine at first. Individuals and legal entities were looking for ways to “help” Ukrainians. Slovak citizens helped at the border, contributed to fundraising, and provided their apartments and houses to accommodate Ukrainian refugees (Bárta, Sabo and Dobrovanov, 2022). It can even be argued that the public responded to the need for help to Ukrainians faster than state institutions. Despite the positive reaction of Slovak citizens, however, in the first days after the outbreak of the Russian invasion, there were sporadic opinions that refugees from Ukraine posed a threat to Slovakia. The bearers of such views came mainly from the ranks of representatives of the Slovak far right and far left.

After a few weeks into Russia’s military attack on Ukraine, negative views of Ukrainian refugees started to appear more and more also in the political discourse. Some people in Slovakia have begun to negatively perceive that Ukrainian children have to be placed in pre-schools and schools. It is generally known that in some Slovak cities, there is a shortage of places in kindergartens compared to the actual demand. The question has also been raised as to whether Ukrainian refugees will pose competition in the labour market for the domestic workforce. Finally, crimes committed by incoming Ukrainians have also become a subject matter of public discussion.

The Slovak public discourse on Ukrainian refugees has been negatively affected by two factors. The first factor is the long-standing cautious negative attitude of the Slovak public towards migration. A significant part of the public perceives the phenomenon of international migration negatively. This attitude can be observed since 2015, when many Slovak politicians used the topic of international migration to mobilize voters, drawing attention mainly to the negative aspects of international migration and its potential threats to the autochthonous society (Androvičová, 2017; Lidák, 2019; Spálová and Račeková, 2022). The second factor is the traditionally positive attitude of a part of the Slovak public towards the Russian Federation. This positive attitude towards Russia is subsequently reflected in the policies of some political parties, mostly far-right, as well as in the high level of distrust towards the USA and NATO. Thus, a positive attitude

towards Russia on the one hand and a negative attitude towards the USA on the other can also be reflected in a negative attitude towards Ukraine, or towards Ukrainian refugees.

The aim of this paper is to explain how the public discourse in Slovakia has shaped views on Ukrainian refugees since the start of the Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine, i.e. since February 24, 2022. The text will present the views of representatives of the far right and the far left, who have a positive attitude towards Russia and a negative attitude towards the USA. Thus, the text seeks to answer the question of what Slovak radical politicians say about Ukrainian refugees and how they talk about them as a possible security risk for the domestic population.

## 2 SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION

The subject of international migration has long ceased to be a matter for the Ministry of Labour or Social Affairs. Migration has become an important issue in relations between states or between states and organisations. For this reason, political scientists and international relations experts have become interested in it (Seresová, 2022a; Demirkol, 2023). In the past, migration was seen as a „*factor for the production and development of capitalism*“ (Ibrahim, 2005). With the increasing number of migrants, migration has also come to be discussed in the context of security issues (Weiner, 1993; Demirkol, 2022). Some politicians have begun to present migration as a source of threat to nation-states and European civilisation. Their arguments are based on the belief that homogeneous national communities can exist if migration from culturally and religiously distinct states is curtailed (Huysmans, 2000).

Nowadays, the issue of security is also being addressed by representatives of various social science disciplines. Among the pioneers of this concept are representatives of the Copenhagen School, such as Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1998). These authors interpret security as a speech act (Wæver, 2007). It is for this reason that a wealth of security research can be found among researchers on the language of politics (Dulebová, 2022). In the subject of security, the state plays an important role because it claims the right to use any means to eliminate the threat (Wæver, 2007). Gerard (2014) sees securitization in a similar way. According to this author, securitization is represented by „*discursive practices that produce an existential threat to which a security response is then required*“ (Gerard 2014, p. 30).

In the context of this definition, it is necessary to note the discursive strategies of the representatives of the far right and the far left. They argue that security threats need to be responded to forcefully. According to radical politicians, international migration is one of the significant security threats to contemporary society. These politicians tend to argue that there are several ways to eliminate the threat (better border protection, even physical barriers at the borders, restrictive immigration and asylum policies, and policies to expulse the migrants suspected of criminal activity from the country) (Onufrák, 2012; Štefančík, Némethová and Seresová, 2021).

Previous research shows that radical politicians present migration as a multidimensional threat (Štefančík and Kiner, 2021). In the first dimension, it is a personal threat, i.e., migrants are supposed to threaten either the health or even the life of a person. In the second dimension, it is the cultural dimension. In this context, radical politicians mainly consider migrants coming from other religious regions as a threat. Islamophobic populism was identified in the communication strategies of some Slovak politicians even before 2015 (Štefančík, 2011). The economic threat is expressed in the fear of competition in the labour market. Finally, we also register a political threat in the migration discourse, when radical politicians speak of migration policy as coercion of Brussels on the policies of nation-states, as the European Union is supposed to impose its views of migrants on national governments.

### 3 METHODOLOGY AND OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION DATA

We will arrive at the above-formulated goal through political discourse analysis. Political discourse covers a wide range of different topics and different methods can be used in the analysis. One of them is qualitative discourse analysis based on the evaluation of political actors' statements on different topics. Political discourse is not only made up of politicians but also of representatives of non-governmental associations, political analysts, academics or scientists (van Dijk, 1997). In the context of this article, we are talking about an analysis of migration discourse. Van Dijk (2018) accentuates that migration discourse is not always just about migration, but can also be an essential part of migration as a phenomenon.

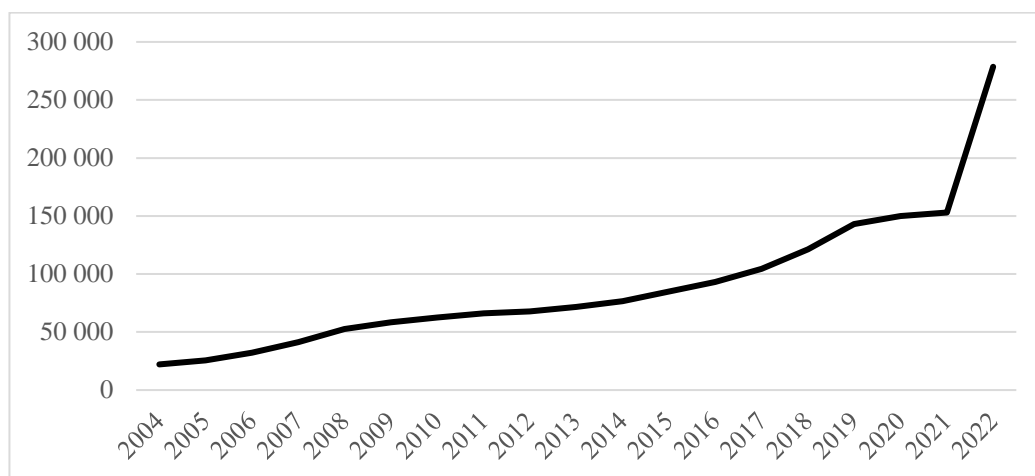
According to van Dijk (2018), there are several genres of migration discourse. These can be, for example, narratives of migration actors, and equally so parliamentary speeches by politicians. Actors other than politicians can also engage in migration discourse, such as journalists, commentators, or readers of newspaper articles who express (often anonymously on social media) their views on migration as well as integration policy.

This text presents the results of research on the communication of representatives of the Slovak far right and far left on the topic of migration from Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian military aggression. The corpus consists of statements by representatives of three political parties, two far-right – *Republika* and *Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia* (ESNS) and one far-left – *Smer - Slovak Social Democracy* – published in the period from February 24, 2022 to the end of February 2023 in various forms (audio video, official party documents or social media posts). By searching for texts about Ukrainian refugees, we also used special text search engines such as “blbec.online” (aimed at searching comments and posts on social networks) and the search engine of the digital archive of the Slovak Parliament (<https://www.nrsr.sk/dl>).

The public discourse on international migration in Slovakia fully developed only in the context of the migration situation in 2015 and 2016. After this period, interest in

international migration also grew among Slovak scholars in the humanities and social sciences (Přivara and Kiner, 2021; Seresová, 2022b). As shown in Figure 1, Slovakia did not experience a significantly higher increase in the number of foreigners with residence permits during this period. However, Figure 1 shows a significant increase in the number of foreigners from 2022, the year of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Of the 278 595 foreigners, 56 070 were from EU Member States. The remainder were foreigners from third countries. By comparison, in 2011 the ratio was 56 092 and 111 427. While the number of foreigners from EU countries has slightly decreased, the number of foreigners from third countries has doubled. The main reason for this was immigration from Ukraine.

Figure 1: Number of valid residencies for foreigners as of 31.12.2022



Source: Bureau of the border and foreign police, 2022.

As of March 1, 2023, there were 98 095 residents of Ukraine registered in Slovakia who had applied for temporary protection in Slovakia. This number does not include immigrants from Ukraine who came to Slovakia before the war. The structure of the migrant population may be crucial for the relationship of the autochthonous society to migrants. In the case of Ukrainians, three factors are involved. The first factor is the reason for arrival. The war in Ukraine was perceived more intensely by the Slovak population because of its close proximity. A country neighbouring Slovakia was attacked. The second factor is the cultural proximity of the Ukrainian refugees. Finally, the third factor is the demographic structure of the Ukrainian refugees. As shown in Table 1, Ukrainian refugees are dominated by women. When the media reported on migration from African and Middle Eastern countries in 2015 and 2016, the opinion that migrants are mainly male emerged in the public debate. Indeed, some (alternative) media showed mainly male migrants. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, this manipulative view would not have held up, as women (circa 50 per cent) and children (circa 35 per cent) dominated

among the migrants. More than half of the refugees from Ukraine are people of working age, so they can enter the labour market immediately and, thus, are not dependent on social assistance.

Table 1: Number of tolerated stays of foreigners on the Slovak Republic territory for temporary protection as of 2.3.2023

<i>Age/Gender</i>									Total
0-17		0-17	18-60		18-60	60+		60+	
Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
<b>17274</b>	<b>16811</b>	<b>34085</b>	<b>12325</b>	<b>43326</b>	<b>55651</b>	<b>2524</b>	<b>5835</b>	<b>8359</b>	<b>98095</b>

Source: BBFP – Bureau of the Border and foreign police, 2023.

Politicians’ attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees can also be influenced by the overall view of society. In this context, we will draw attention to the 2022 Eurobarometer opinion poll, which aimed, among other things, to find out what the citizens of the European Union Member States think about military and humanitarian support to Ukraine, as well as to Ukrainian refugees. According to the results of this survey, 86 per cent of the Slovak population thinks that we should provide humanitarian support to people affected by war (EU average 91 per cent). Although at first sight, this is a high number, Slovakia is the third country after Romania (71 per cent) and Bulgaria (81 per cent) with the lowest willingness to provide humanitarian support to people affected by the war. At the other end of the scale, there is the Netherlands, where 99 per cent agree to humanitarian aid. Slovakia is similarly at the bottom of the rankings when it comes to supporting Ukrainian refugees (81 per cent, EU average 88 per cent). Slovakia ranks dead last among the EU Member States when asked whether the population agrees with the diversification of energy sources, the aim of which would be greater independence from the Russian Federation (55 per cent, EU average 84 per cent). Although most of the Slovak society thinks that the government should help Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees, and even the majority of society thinks that energy resources should be diversified, compared to other EU member states it is clear that there is an unignorable group of people in Slovakia with a positive attitude towards Russia and a negative attitude towards Ukraine. It is precisely this fact that may influence the political discourse on issues related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

#### **4 RESULTS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

In Slovakia, far-right populists are just one of several actors in the migration discourse. However, their communication strategy contributes significantly to the securitisation of migration discourse (Štefančík, Némethová and Seresová, 2021). They were already extremely negative towards migrants in 2015 and 2016 and presented a similarly negative attitude towards migration from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war. The far-left Smer-SD party presents a similarly negative attitude towards migrants.

We consider Smer-SD to be a far-left populist party because it uses similar rhetoric and communication strategies to far-right radical parties. This rhetoric is based on creating an image of the enemy. Enemy groups have left-wing radical parties similar to right-wing populist parties (immigrants, the US, free media), expressing positive messages towards Russia and criticizing foreign aid to Ukraine.

The attitude of far-right and far-left populists towards Ukrainian refugees is based on their relationship with the Russian Federation. Although a positive attitude towards Russia is more likely to be assumed in the communication strategies of the far left (Štefančík, 2022), the far right also has a positive view of Russia. In explaining this consideration, we can find three reasons. First of all, pro-Russian sentiment fits into dichotomous thinking in the sense of friend versus foe. If populists criticize the establishment, which openly supports the pro-Western direction represented by the governments of Western Europe and the USA, populists, on the contrary, support the Russian Federation because it represents the opposite of the Western world. Public opinion polls show that there is a large group of people in Slovakia who have a positive perception of Russia and are not disturbed by the authoritarian style of Putin's regime. According to an AKO poll conducted at the end of February 2022, up to a quarter of respondents held the US responsible for the war in Ukraine (Blaško, 2022). The third reason may be regarded as speculation, but there is ample evidence to support its probative value. The assumption that Russia is financially supporting some Slovak political parties cannot be completely ruled out. In the past, there have been suspicions that Slovak right-wing extremists were financially supported by a Russian businessman on the European Union's sanctions list (ČTK, 2017). One of the goals of the Putin regime is the unstable situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which could have a negative impact on the situation across the European Union.

The pro-Russian sentiment was present in the language of radical populists even after the military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. Despite the fact that the entire democratic world condemned the attack on the free country and saw Russia as the clear aggressor, Slovak populists sought the reason for the attack on Ukraine in the US foreign policy. Even though the media brought horrifying videos of the war zone every day, Slovak populists were looking for a way to express sympathy for Russia:

*– „I am sad to see Slav brother fighting against brother, while the one who pitted them against each other is already enjoying how much money he will make out of it, and how he will weaken the family of our Slavic peoples once again“ (M. Uhrík, FB, 24.02.2022).*

The combination of a positive attitude towards Russia and a negative attitude towards migrants was also reflected in the negative attitude towards migration from Ukraine in the early days. In addition to Ukrainian citizens, foreigners who were in

Ukraine for various reasons, such as foreign students at Ukrainian universities, also migrated from the war-affected country. As they were foreigners with a different skin colour than the indigenous population, they immediately came to the attention of both left-wing and right-wing populists. They pointed out that persons accused of criminal activity were also coming to Slovakia from Ukraine, which could have caused a negative attitude towards the immigrated Ukrainians and thus undermined the initially majority-sympathetic attitude of the Slovak public towards the Ukrainian war refugees. The following statements highlight the threat of migration, albeit not of Ukrainian refugees, but of other migrants arriving in Europe from Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion:

– *„I personally don't see any mothers with children here. I see one Africa here. ... This is the absolute end of all European civilisation. All this is an absolute negation of what we have achieved here in the two thousand years of our European civilisation. I'm shocked, I'm disgusted“* (Mizík, S., youtube, 28.02.2022).

– *„Two Africans, one from Tunisia and the other from Nigeria, also so-called Ukrainian refugees, left Ukraine on 6 March this year. They even had Ukrainian passports, so they raped a Ukrainian girl, just 18 years old, in Düsseldorf, Germany“* (Schlossár, R., NRSR, 30.03.2022).

The analysis of the political speeches confirmed the assumption that the representatives of the far right and the far left will not emphasize the cultural dimension of the migration of the Ukrainian population due to cultural proximity. The populists mainly drew attention to the negative aspects of migration from Ukraine, and they found these in some criminal acts:

– *„We bring you an exclusive interview with a taxi driver who was recently ambushed by three Ukrainians... Among Ukrainians, some are a great risk, a great danger to us... We would like to bring you an interview with a taxi driver who was recently hijacked by three Ukrainians to Poland“* (ĽSNS, youtube, 18.02.2023).

In addition to representatives of the far right, representatives of the far left have also expressed negative views on Ukrainian migrants. Ľuboš Blaha, the vice-chairman of the Smer-SD, stressed the criminal character of the Ukrainian refugees in his statement:

– *„They can't even protect Slovakia from the thick-skinned mafia that comes here from Ukraine“* (Ľ. Blaha, FB, 01.04.2022).

The country's economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic created new jobs that could have been filled by refugees from Ukraine. For this reason, the economic threat of migration from Ukraine is articulated cautiously for the time being. Some



politicians suggest that the state takes better care of Ukrainians than it does of its citizens, or that in the case of Ukrainians it is mainly economic migrants, not military refugees:

– „Solidarity – great, we can help, but the help must never be higher than the help for the Slovak citizen“ (Kočiš, E., NRSR, 22.03.2022).

– „We are not facing an influx of some destitute war refugees, because the women, children and elderly who are coming to us are very few indeed, but that we are facing an influx of economic migrants“ (Schlossár, R., NRSR, 15.11.2022).

– „The state accommodation allowance for those leaving Ukraine will increase by 10% due to high energy prices. What about Slovak citizens, when will they receive relevant help?!“ (Vorobelová, S., FB, 01.12.2022).

– „It seems that the Slovak Treasury is a bottomless well when it comes to aid for those who have left Ukraine. In any circumstances, there are hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of euros to be found in it for aid for people coming to us from our eastern neighbour. Are they war refugees at all, or are they just economic migrants?“ (Vorobelová, S., FB, 01.12.2022).

## 5 DISCUSSION

Representatives of the far right and the far left have so far been very cautious in expressing their negative attitude towards Ukrainian refugees. They are not as openly opposed to them as, for example, to the Ukrainian politicians, especially to President Zelenskyy. However, the above-mentioned messages, published mainly on social media, provoke hateful comments from voters and sympathisers of radical politicians. For example, if a politician publishes a critical message on aid to Ukrainian refugees, anonymous commentators usually use vulgar language to comment on the state's policy. Politicians do not openly spread hatred, but create all the conditions for its spread among their voters and sympathisers. We predict that in the near future, critical contributions to the aid to Ukrainian refugees may increase, which Slovak politicians from the far right and far left will use to mobilise the electorate. Inciting hatred towards migrant Ukrainians is now a way of communicating, especially through various disinformation websites. Information about refugees behaving illegally in various European countries is then disseminated by voters of far-right and far-left parties. We, therefore, believe that in the near future, it is the radical parties that will use the change in viewing Ukrainians to mobilise voters. Political parties are taking note of how different parts of society react and are adjusting their political messages according to the current mood of public opinion. In this context, it is appropriate to note that the actors of securitization are mostly politicians, but they can also be people outside politics (Dulebová, 2022), and it is them who accentuate the security threat of migration processes more than politicians.

A common feature of the refugee debate in 2015 and 2016 and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the use of the term “economic migrants”. This term originally had

a neutral to positive connotation in the general migration discourse. As a rule, labour migrants can have a positive impact on the national economy of the destination country of migration (Přivara and Kiner, 2021). In the context of the situation in 2015 and 2016, Slovak politicians used this term to refer to refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries. Using this term, politicians rejected the idea that those migrants were refugees persecuted in their homes or leaving their home country because of war. The politicians pointed out that the real reason for the migrants' leaving the country was economic. So, after a few years, the term is coming back into the Slovak migration discourse. Some politicians, by using this term, reject the idea that Ukrainians leave their country of origin only because of the war. The term that has since acquired a negative connotation in the public debate is thus reappearing.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

The analysis shows that some Slovak left and right radicals have already communicated various forms of security risk in connection with the migration of Ukrainian refugees. In particular, radical politicians articulate threats to personal security. Politicians draw attention to the criminal offences of some refugees, without taking the same view of the native population. The economic dimension is also emphasised. From this perspective, refugees are perceived as people who are being helped, even though Slovakia's indigenous population would also deserve help. As we expected, radical politicians do not emphasize the cultural dimension of the threat. This dimension of threat was present in migration discourse in 2015 and 2016, but in the case of Ukrainian refugees, radical politicians do not articulate the threat from refugees' different cultural patterns of behaviour.

So far, radical politicians have been very cautious in expressing their criticism towards Ukrainian refugees. However, they are particularly active in the case of the war in Ukraine. They often take a pro-Russian stance on this issue. It is precisely their pro-Russian attitudes that may also influence their attitude towards possible aid to Ukrainian refugees in the near future. The pro-Russian politicians criticise in particular the foreign policy of the Slovak government. They criticise sanctions against Russia or military aid to Ukraine (e.g. the donation of the S-300 anti-missile system or MIG-29 military aircraft). There have even been fears that the government will mobilise young men who will take an active part in the war. They are equally critical of Ukraine's political representation.

Surveys of the European institutions (Eurobarometer, 2023) show that Slovakia ranks last among the EU member states in terms of willingness to assist Ukraine with military or humanitarian support. Many Slovak citizens reject economic sanctions on the Russian government or are not willing to help Ukrainian refugees. Based on this survey, it can be assumed that some politicians will want to mobilise precisely those voters who have a critical and negative attitude towards Ukraine. We, therefore, conclude that anti-

Ukrainian attitudes will continue to be part of the communication strategies of some political actors – especially left-wing and right-wing radical populists.

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