

## **Digital Media Response of Slovak Political Representatives of Coalition to Attempted Assassination of Robert Fico – A Critical Discourse Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*World leaders universally condemned the assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, deeming it a threat to democratic principles. In our paper, we examine the digital media response of prominent Slovak politicians, including the Prime Minister himself, to understand how linguistic choices were used to convey meaning, emotion, and power. Using the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Stylistics, our research comprises the rhetoric of 3 prominent Slovak politicians communicated through digital media. The findings provide unique insight into how language is a powerful instrument employed by political leaders, using linguistic strategies including linguistic manipulation as an influential instrument of political rhetoric to persuade audiences for a specific political action.*

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, linguistic manipulation, political rhetoric, power struggle, Slovakia.

### **Introduction**

Attempted assassinations of political leaders are unique political events due to several factors. They are a direct assault on democracy as these events undermine institutions challenging the fundamental principles of democracy, where the people's will is expressed through elected representatives.

Also, they can erode public trust in political institutions and processes. Attempted assassinations necessitate increased security measures for political leaders, which can have significant economic and social implications and can create a sense of fear and anxiety among the public, leading to a loss of confidence in their safety and security.

Recently, we have been witnessing two major attempted assassinations of political leaders: Donald Trump, a former president of the United States

and the nominee of the Republican Party in the 2024 presidential election, survived an assassination attempt while speaking at an open-air campaign rally near Butler, Pennsylvania on July 13, 2024. A month earlier, on 15 May 2024, Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico was shot and critically injured in Handlová after a government meeting. The reactions of European and world leaders to both attempts have been coming in via media with many deploring the attacks and saying violence has no place in politics. (euronews.com, 2024)

While there is a wealth of research on political discourse, particularly in the context of significant violent political events (Asfaw 2024, Mutz 2006, 2008, Hayward 2008, Castelli Gatinara and Froio 2014, Mustaqim and Haroni 2024, Taegyoon 2022, Johnson and Tracy 2021), finding specific studies focusing solely on discourse analysis of politicians' reactions to such events can be challenging. This is often due to the interdisciplinary nature of such research, which may draw from fields like political science, communication studies, and psychology. We aimed to fill the niche in this discourse analysis by examining how politicians frame and interpret assassination attempts to gain insights into the dominant ideologies and values shaping their responses.

In our paper, we examine the digital media response of prominent Slovak politicians, including the Prime Minister himself, to understand how linguistic choices and discourse structures were used to convey meaning, emotion, and power and negotiated through language in a specific rare political context- the period right after the assassination attempt.

Using the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Stylistics, our research comprises the rhetoric of 3 prominent Slovak politicians communicated through digital media. Analysis suggested that linguistic tools and trolling strategies seen throughout the corpus are used to generate certain tension and hostility. These findings provide unique insight into how language is a powerful instrument employed by political leaders, using linguistic strategies including linguistic manipulation as an influential instrument of political rhetoric to persuade audiences for a specific political action.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Research background***

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a partic-

ular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth) (Fairclough 2013).

According to Flowerdew (2008), the goal of CDA is to disclose the social abnormalities, uncover the hidden assumptions and debunk claims of authority by examining language in use. Many linguistic features that CDA examines in texts to achieve the above aim are identified by various scholars in the field. For example, Van Dijk (2001) in Flowerdew (2008) itemises some features which are ‘word order, lexical style, coherence, word choice, topic choice, speech acts, rhetorical figures, syntactic structure and so on. According to Rahmani and Saeed (2024), key features of political language include rhetorical devices, metaphors, metonymy, pronouns, presuppositions, repetition of words and various stylistic devices. These tools help create persuasive messages that influence how people think and act.

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is particularly useful for analyzing how language is used to create meaning and how it is structured to achieve specific communicative purposes. In this case, SFL could also be used to examine lexical choices, how specific words and phrases are used to convey meaning, emotion, and power and discourse structures, how language is organized into coherent texts and how these texts are used to construct arguments and persuade audiences (Banks 2019, Fontaine 2013).

Critical stylistics focuses on the analysis of language as a tool for social and ideological control. This approach could be used to examine ideological representations, i.e. how language is used to represent and reinforce particular ideologies and worldviews and power relations, how language is used to maintain and challenge power structures.

Toolan (2013) argued that stylistics, traditionally used for the analysis of literary texts, could also be applied to non-literary texts to understand how language is used to construct meaning and power relations. Toolan's work helped to bridge the gap between literary and critical discourse analysis, and his approach has become a significant component of CDA methodology.

### ***Political background***

Slovakia was shaken on May 15, 2024, by the assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico. The perpetrator, Juraj C., admitted in a leaked video that his act was politically motivated. The assassination reflected the deep societal polarization and hatred that had been escalating. Calls for unity and reconciliation were met with resistance, as some politicians and disinformation outlets continued to stoke animosity through harmful narratives, particularly on social media.

Over time, government politicians began promoting conspiracy theories online (infosecurity.sk, 2024) suggesting that Fico was a victim of his peaceful policies and blaming mysterious foreign forces. These fearmongering tactics were used to mobilize support ahead of the European Parliament elections in Slovakia.

Attacks on the opposition and the media can be expected to continue in the near future. Part of the coalition leaders and the disinformation ecosystem will probably work to create a deadly image - not only in the case of Robert Fico, but also of the government as a whole. With conspiracy theories and attacks on their political (and media) opponents, these actors contribute mainly to scaremongering and further polarisation of Slovak society. Both levels are highly usable for justifying the monopolisation of power.

## **Research design and methodology**

Based on our aims, we decided that suitable CDA method for this research would be a combination of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Stylistics. By combining SFL and critical stylistics, the research can gain a comprehensive understanding of how language is used in the digital media responses of Slovak political representatives.

We aimed to observe the digital media response of prominent Slovak politicians to understand how linguistic choices and discourse structures were used to convey meaning, emotion, and power and negotiated through language in specific rare political context- the period right after the assassination attempt. For this purpose we have formulated the following research questions:

- *What linguistic strategies were employed by coalition members to convey their stance on the event and to position themselves within the political landscape?*
- *To what extent did the language used by coalition members reflect or reinforce existing political divisions in Slovakia?*

In our approach to selecting politicians' rhetoric, we attempted to focus on content extracted from social media (Facebook profiles of the politicians) and digital Slovak media quoting the reactions of selected politicians. The content aimed to respond to the assassination attempt, either immediate or with a close interval of time. The quotations were translated from Slovak language to English by the author.

By selecting the reactions of the Prime Minister himself as well as of Ľuboš Blaha, a very rhetorically proficient and chronically well-known system critic, we have created a significant sample of leading personalities of the current leading political party of the Slovak Republic. Tomáš Taraba was also added to the trio of politicians analysed, who is considered as one of the most active Slovak politicians on social media.

## Findings

### Robert Fico- the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic

Robert Fico is a Slovak politician who is currently serving as the Prime minister of Slovakia since 2023. He previously served as prime minister from 2006 to 2010 and from 2012 to 2018. He founded the left-wing political party Direction – Social Democracy in 1999 and has led the party since. Fico holds a record as the longest-serving prime minister in the country's history, having served for over 10 years.

He reportedly expects the *"anti-government media, foreign-funded NGOs and the opposition"* to play down the attempt to assassinate him. *"That it was just an attack by a delusional person, that there were no links between him and the opposition, that the damage to my health is not serious,"* he listed the expected reactions.

*"I have no reason to believe that this was an attack by a lone deranged person,"* he assessed.

*"Again I urge them to do the now famous Robert Fico test. How would they behave if something similar happened to one of the leaders of the Slovak opposition and the attacker was a person with links to Smer-SD,"* (infosecurity.sk 2024)

He reportedly also spoke about a possible assassination attempt on a government politician at international meetings and asked cabinet members not to go into the crowd. *"No, I had no intelligence information, but my 32 years of experience in politics warned me,"* he noted.

According to the Prime Minister, no one has set a mirror to the opposition's aggression. *"Neither the media, nor NGOs, nor the head of state, nor Brussels or NATO,"* he said.

According to Fico, the policy of large democracies is manifested by the fact that attacks *"against legitimate governmental power"* are *"tolerated at the international level without any comment"*.

*"The opposition was unable to judge, because no one forced it to, where its aggressive and hateful policies had taken a part of society and it was only a matter of time before tragedy struck,"* he noted.

*"Resistance against a politician you disagree with is not solved by shooting him. I am no political angel either. I know how to be properly tough,"* (Robert Fico Facebook profile, June 5, 2024)

On his Facebook profile, he continued in posting his statuses addressing the public:

*"The Interior Ministry had to increase protection for the Culture Minister today after yesterday's opposition rally. Congratulations, Mr Šimečka and Mr Gröhlting, you are naive political adolescents and you have allowed yourselves to be dragged by the media and political NGOs into a dangerous escalation of tensions in Slovakia, the result of which will be another assassination of a representative of the governing coalition."* (Robert Fico Facebook profile, August 14, 2024).

**Framing and Blame Attribution:** Fico often frames the opposition as a direct cause of societal violence and aggression. Phrases like *"the hate-blinded assassin was just an extended arm of the opposition"* serve to construct a narrative where the opposition is responsible for the actions of individuals, effectively criminalizing dissent.

**Victimization and Authority:** He positions himself as a victim of both personal attacks and broader political aggression, stating *"this was not an attack by a deranged person."* This language seeks to elicit sympathy while reinforcing his authority as a leader under threat.

**Dichotomous Language:** Fico uses a clear us-versus-them dichotomy, emphasizing loyalty to the state and government versus the chaos attributed to the opposition. Terms like *"aggressive," "hateful,"* and *"deranged"* create a stark contrast between his perceived order and the opposition's alleged disorder.

**Use of Imperatives and Urgency:** The frequent use of imperatives, such as *"I urge them to do the now famous Robert Fico test,"* conveys urgency and a call to action, positioning Fico as a decisive leader in a time of crisis.

**Appeals to Nationalism and Democratic Values:** His statements often appeal to national pride and democratic values, stating that *"Slovaks want to live in a normal state,"* which reinforces a collective identity that aligns with his government's narrative.

**Reference to Experience and Expertise:** Fico frequently mentions his political experience (e.g., *"my 32 years of experience in politics warned me"*), which serves to bolster his credibility and authority as someone who understands the complexities of governance.

**Defensive and Aggressive Posturing:** Phrases like *"I know how to be properly tough"* convey a sense of resilience and readiness to confront opposition, reinforcing his image as a strong leader who will not back down.

### **Luboš Blaha- Member of the European Parliament**

Luboš Blaha is a Slovak politician, academic, post-Marxist philosopher and political scientist. He is a presidium member of the left-wing political party Direction – Slovak Social Democracy and Robert Fico's foreign-policy aide. Blaha has served as a Member of the European Parliament since 2024, having previously served as an MP of the National Council of Slovakia from 2012 to 2024.

After the assassination attempt of PM, in the European Parliament election campaign, politicians on the SMER-SD party's candidate list, have traditionally focused on war scaremongering. They pragmatically presented themselves as victims of a hate lynch mob of the media and the opposition. Luboš Blaha persuaded his supporters that he and his colleagues were targets of persecution and attempts at liquidation precisely because of their different views on the war in Ukraine:

*"This election will be about war or peace. And you are war, we are peace. Very simple."* (Luboš Blaha's Telegram profile, 2024)

In his contributions, speaking to his supporters during the euro-election campaign, he also turns the attention of his audience to a kind of hatred of the opposition party Progressive Slovakia. He often refers to it especially in connection with the assassination of Fico:

*"Perhaps the reasoning of the liberal camp led them to liquidate Robert Fico, because without him the Smer party has no future," "We can try, but he is in a league with which we cannot compare. We have to be sensible and limit the handful of solutions a bit."* (Postoj 2024)

*"People tell us 'abolish Progressive Slovakia, persecute them', 'do to them what they did to us'. But we can't do that," Blaha explains to supporters. "It would be easiest to create a Lipšic Gestapo like them and criminalise the opposition. We won't do that!"* (Postoj 2024)

*"The truth is that the investigation is continuing and we may learn terrible things. We can't talk to you about what we know at the moment, but we can already tell you clearly based on the profile of the assassin that he was*

*one of the liberal camp. He was an offspring of the liberal media, sending letters to Mrs. Čaputová about how smart and wonderful and courageous she was. He would go to PS protests, Democrat protests, where he would hold vulgar slogans" (Postoj 2024).*

According to Blaha, the assassin Juraj C. was not provoked by vulgarities. The other side, according to him, is provoked by the feeling that it is the only one who is right.

*"They feel that they are the heralds of the truth and we are desolates, extremists, a bunch that must be eliminated. Or as the President says, that we are confused and need to be slapped upside the head. They think we are not rational beings. Like when the colonizers went around killing Indians because they thought they were somewhere between animal and man. That's how they see us." (Postoj 2024)*

Blaha may lead his audience to the conspiratorial belief that mysterious foreign forces or so-called progressive hatred are behind the assassination of Robert Fico. In doing so, he not only contributes to the deepening of conflicts in society, but also continues to mislead about the war in Ukraine. However, with his manipulative play on the words peace and war, regardless of the consequences, he has primarily sought to mobilise his voters ahead of the euroelections:

*"The Georgian Prime Minister said that behind the assassination of Robert Fico were certain secret services of a certain country linked to the side of the global war. I will not say now what secret services, what country. You can probably guess..." (Postoj 2024)*

In conducting the CDA of his quotes, several linguistic patterns and rhetorical strategies can be identified that illustrate how he navigates political discourse to shape perceptions, create divisions, and motivate his supporters. Here's a breakdown of these patterns:

**Simple Dichotomies:** Blaha's statement "This election will be about war or peace. And you are war, we are peace" exemplifies the use of binary oppositions. This simplification of complex political realities serves to polarize opinions and foster an "us versus them" mentality, which is a common tactic in political rhetoric.

**Emotional and Fear-Inducing Language:** Blaha regularly employs emotive language, such as "*terrible things*" associated with the ongoing in-



vestigation or the term “*Gestapo*,” which provokes fear and evokes historical trauma. Such language is designed to elicit strong emotional reactions and rally his audience under a shared sense of threat.

**Victimhood and Oppression:** By illustrating that his supporters must resist calls to “*persecute*” the opposition, Blaha frames his group as a noble, victimized entity fighting against oppressive forces. This appeal to victimhood can foster solidarity among supporters and establish a moral high ground.

**Conspiratorial Framing:** The suggestion that “*mysterious foreign forces*” are behind local events, such as the assassination of Fico, invokes a conspiratorial narrative that can foster distrust in established institutions and leaders. This technique is effective in mobilizing support by creating a sense of urgency and danger.

**Coded Language:** Phrases like “offspring of the liberal media” serve as a code, indicating an ideological battle not just against individuals but against ideologies. This kind of labelling helps to deviate attention from concrete policy issues to rather abstract conflicts over beliefs and values.

**Hyperbole and Extremes:** Statements such as “*They think we are not rational beings*” and comparisons to historical atrocities (like the colonization of Native Americans) create stark images that aim to delegitimize the opposition's viewpoints. This hyperbolic discourse can discredit opposing arguments by portraying them as not just misguided, but fundamentally inhumane.

**Appeals to Shared Identity:** Blaha's remarks about his supporters being labeled as “*desolates, extremists*” create an in-group identity among listeners. Using collective pronouns like “we” enhances feelings of camaraderie and reinforces group identity against the perceived adversary.

**Ambiguity and Speculation:** His statement about “*certain secret services*” behind the assassination encourages speculation without committing to any specific claims. This kind of ambiguity allows him to imply wrongdoing without needing to provide evidence, which is a manipulation tactic in political discourse.

These linguistic patterns demonstrate how Blaha's discourse operates not only to convey information but also to frame reality, mobilize voters, and create divisions in society. Through critical discourse analysis, we can see that language in politics is a powerful tool that shapes public perception and influences political outcomes.

## Tomáš Taraba

Tomáš Taraba is a Slovak politician who has been serving as Deputy Prime Minister of Slovakia and Minister of Environment in Robert Fico's Fourth cabinet since 25 October 2023. Taraba is among the three most popular ministers in the Slovak government, boasting a total approval rating of 43% as of April 2024 (tvnoviny.sk 2024).

*"The whole hateful opposition has blood on their hands!"* (Tomáš Taraba Facebook profile 2024).

*"Our prime minister has mentioned several times in the past that he was worried that this would happen"* (postoj.sk 2024).

*"If a Smer Party pensioner had shot someone from the opposition yesterday, today we have a revolution in the streets and an isolated Slovakia"* (Tomáš Taraba Facebook profile 2024)

*"Yesterday's attack was an attack by a fanatical person who spread the narratives of the progressive media on the Prime Minister..."* (Denník N 2024).

**Direct Accusation and Blame:** The phrase "the whole hateful opposition has blood on their hands" employs direct and accusatory language. This suggests a strong attribution of guilt to the opposition, framing them as responsible for violence and unrest, which serves to mobilize his base against perceived enemies.

**Demonization of the Opposition:** By using the term "*hateful*," Taraba paints the opposition as malevolent, creating a clear moral divide. This demonization strategy is effective in fostering a sense of urgency and crisis among supporters.

**Framing and Narrative Construction:** Taraba refers to "*false narratives*" propagated by opposition parties. This framing technique not only discredits the opposition but also positions his party as the truth-tellers, reinforcing a binary view of politics where his side represents reality and the opposition represents deceit.

**References to Violence:** The description of the attacker as a "*fanatical person*" implies that the perpetrator's actions are connected to broader ideological narratives, specifically those from "*progressive media*." This links media narratives to violent outcomes, effectively shifting blame away from the political sphere and onto cultural discourse.

## Conclusion

The critical discourse analysis of the political speeches by Fico, Blaha and Taraba reveals a consistent pattern of divisive and manipulative rhetoric aimed at mobilizing support, demonizing opponents, and reinforcing existing political divisions. More particularly, to answer our above-mentioned research questions, we can conclude that key themes that emerged from the analysis include:

**Binary oppositions:** The use of stark contrasts and simplified dichotomies to polarize the political landscape and create an "us versus them" mentality.

**Rhetorical strategies:** The employment of various rhetorical devices, such as emotional appeals, fear-mongering, and victimhood narratives, to manipulate public opinion.

**Conspiratorial framing:** The use of speculative and unfounded claims to undermine trust in established institutions and create a sense of crisis.

**Demonization of opponents:** The use of derogatory language and negative stereotypes to discredit opposing viewpoints and delegitimize political rivals.

**Mobilization and division:** The strategic use of language to galvanize supporters, create divisions within society, and reinforce existing political identities.

These findings highlight the power of language in shaping political discourse and influencing public opinion. By understanding the linguistic techniques employed by political actors, we can better critically evaluate political rhetoric and resist manipulative tactics.

The findings could serve as the basis for future broadening of the scope of such research conducting, for example, a comparative analysis of the coalition and opposition's leaders' rhetoric on such tragic events or bring the focus on quantitative analysis of specific linguistic choices in the form of word frequencies or creation of word clouds.

## Corpus resources

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