Liberal as an Enemy. The Word 'Liberal' in the Language of Slovak Radical Populists

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Abstract

The paper aims to explain how Slovak radical populists use the word liberal in communication with voters. The corpus of the examined text consists of statements made by representatives of four radical Slovak political parties - Smer-SD, SNS, Republika, and ĽSNS, which were published on social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram or as part of a debate in parliament. The main finding is that Slovak populists use the word liberal in a different meaning than its original one. Populists present liberals as enemies of the Slovak people and use the adjective liberal in the sense of evil, hostile, and corrupt. In the language of the populists, a liberal is not a supporter of liberalism and liberal values. Still, the populists present him as a person opposed to the people and the nation. This communication strategy corresponds to the same strategy used by authoritarian rulers in non-democratic regimes.

Introduction

I will begin this paper by pointing to a scholarly monograph by Slovak linguists Nina Cingerova and Irina Dulebova entitled "*Language and Conflict. Us and the Other in Russian Public Discourse (2019)*", in which they note, among other things, the shifting meaning of the word liberal (or, as an adjective, liberal) in Russian public, i.e. primarily political, discourse. The authors note how the semantics of the word liberal have shifted in recent years, either through occasional word-formation practices or by placing it in a context intended to evoke negative associations (Cingerová and Dulebová 2019: 59-60). The opposition of two competing modes of signification, within which the displacement of the term liberal also appears, is not a new linguistic phenomenon in Russia. It has been observed for more than a decade (Cingerová 2017). However, shifting the meaning of the word liberal with the obvious intention of using this word primarily in a negative context

is not only typical of Russian public discourse at the moment. Similar communicative strategies can be found in other countries as well. The common feature of these strategies is who uses them. These are mainly populist politicians with a strong tendency to use an authoritarian style of politics.

This article will aim to identify similar communication strategies in Slovak political discourse. This is because, in recent years, some Slovak politicians have been using the word liberal in a shifted meaning in the same way as representatives of the Russian non-democratic regime have been doing for several years. Dichotomous thinking, in which some persons, organizations, or states are considered the enemy of the people, is a typical communicative phenomenon of radical populism and extremism (Štefančík 2020, Dulebová, Štefančík and Cingerová 2024). Therefore, my research will focus primarily on this part of the partisan spectrum.

This text is built on qualitative discourse analysis. Thus, I am not interested in the number of times politicians use particular terms; I focus primarily on the question of the context in which these meanings are used and how their original meanings change. I created the research corpus from texts published online (political party websites and social networks Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube) between 2020 and 2024. The corpus includes statements published during parliamentary debates. Thus, they cover two electoral periods: the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the Slovak parliamentary elections in September 2023, and the assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico in May 2024. The authors of the texts under study are representatives of Slovak radical parties – Smer-SD, SNS, Republika, and ĽSNS.

Dichotomous Thinking of Populists

In defining populism, we mostly encounter three perspectives. The term populism refers to different ideological trends, concepts, political goals, and methods of political communication (Pelinka 2020). According to Jagers and Walgrave (2007), populism is a people-oriented communication strategy that identifies with the people and pretends to speak on behalf of the people. This area can be one of the crucial areas of political linguistics, which focuses on the research of political language (Spišiaková 2017). Weyland (2001) defines populism as a political strategy through which a charismatic leader exercises power based on the direct support of many citizens. Cas Mudde (2004) stresses that populism is a "narrow" ideology because it is a set of only a few ideas, albeit very specific ones. This set is

based on the dichotomy of us and the other. The category of we is distinct. In populist thinking, the people are the universal category of populists. With this strategy, populists want to present that they care about the interests of the people, they want to defend the interests of the people above all, and they know best what the people want (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). In describing the people, populists often emphasize commonalities - belonging to a nation, a religion, an ethnicity, a race, or a region. Reference is made to the special characteristics of the people (nation), such as honesty, industriousness, and a desire for peace. By appealing to the nation and its will, populists reinforce the identification of the target group as an "imagined community" (Reinemann 2017). Although in this text, I note primarily the communicative level of populism, it cannot be separated from the other two. This is because the content of Slovak populists is based on a simple dichotomy of us vs. the other or the other. Moreover, the political parties whose communication strategies I examine in this text are usually headed by a charismatic leader or a politician with a strong position within the organisational structure of the political party.

Populists claim to speak for the people (Canovan 1999, Truan 2019, Smolík and Đorđević 2020). Communication strategies emphasizing the importance of the people are based on homogenizing, simplifying, and thus excluding those who do not belong to the category of the people (Lehner 2019), or are meant to threaten it directly. The category of subject enemies that threaten the people is broad. In communication strategies, we find a variety of enemies. As a rule, these are domestic enemies (corrupt elites, LGBTI, ethnic minorities, media, NGOs, intellectuals, scientists) and external enemies (migrants, Muslims, banks, and international organizations such as the WHO or the WTO, but also the EU and NATO). It is quite clear that these communication strategies seek to mobilise the electorate, regardless of whether they consider the groups in question to be enemies. A populist actor (e.g., a leader, party, or movement) can criticize the power elite by using their public office and position of power for self-enrichment, clientelism, and nepotism (Wojczewski 2020).

The values and behaviour of the "enemies of the people" are considered by populists to be incompatible with the general interest of the people. Therefore, some specific population groups are stigmatized and excluded from the category of people by populists. Populists articulate various real or fictitious threats and present scapegoats whom they accuse of threatening the people (Wodak 2016). Populists blame these groups for negative aspects of social development. For this reason, these groups must be dealt with harshly, if not simply expelled or removed from the nation's territory (Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

A special category of populists are politicians in those countries where they form part of the executive. For example, Maria Stopfner (2021) has examined how populist leaders (such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson) interact once they become part of the executive. Slovakia is one such example. Indeed, several authors point out that for populists, the power elite is corrupt and distant from the people's interests. However, if populists participate in governance, they will not accuse themselves of corruption or say they do not represent the people's interests. Slovakia is one such country where populists must use different communication strategies. Populists in government will not, after all, point out the contradictions between the interests of the people and those of the political elite. They will, therefore, look elsewhere for the enemy of the people.

The German author Tanja Klein (2012) distinguishes between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of populism. While the vertical dimension consists of the dichotomy of the political elite vs. the people, the horizontal dimension is based on the dichotomy of us vs. the strangers, the others. It is this dimension of populism's ideological core that we can identify in the communication strategies of the Slovak ruling elite.

The category of enemies of the people is equally broad among Slovak populists (Demčišák, Fraštíková 2021, Kumorová 2022). In the past, it was members of the Hungarian minority, later the Roma, and in 2015, populists discovered the topic of international migration. Although Slovakia was not on the main migration routes and migrants bypassed Slovakia, the topic of international migration became for a time the main topic of the 2015 election campaign (elections were held in early March 2016).

After the 2020 parliamentary elections, Slovakia's radical populists are in opposition, but the new government has to deal with issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the opposition leader Igor Matovič, who is equally considered a populist (Kazharski and Makarychev 2020), is placed at the head of the government because his communication is based on dividing people into two categories of us and the others (Buštíková and Baboš 2020). However, in the communication of the opposition parties, the word liberal is beginning to appear much more frequently in the meaning of the enemy of the Slovak people.

Who is and Who is Not a Liberal

A liberal generally supports values such as individual liberty, equality, democracy, the rule of law, and social progress. The term 'liberal' can take on different meanings depending on the political, economic, or cultural context

and can vary from region to region, with individual freedom at its core. For liberals, freedom stands at the top of the value ladder, it is the central category of liberalism (Funk 2023).

The adjective liberal is often used in combination with the noun democracy. However, it is not democracy in an ideological context. The adjective liberal is meant to emphasize that it is a form of government that combines democratic principles with a commitment to individual rights and freedoms. It is characterized by free, fair, and just elections, the protection of civil liberties, including the rights of minorities, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. Liberal democracy is thus a form of political regime in which "there is the possibility of freely presenting any opinion as long as it does not provoke hatred against others" (Klátiková and Kmet' 2023: 106).

Opponents of liberalism generally hold views that differ from the basic tenets of liberalism, particularly concerning individual liberties, equality and social progress. These may be different political ideologies that do not contradict the principles of liberal democracy, such as social democracy, conservatism, environmentalism or Christian democracy. Liberals can agree with conservatives on economic issues, for example, but fundamentally oppose each other on cultural and ethical issues. However, the opponents of liberalism and liberals can also include representatives of political systems who reject the principles of liberal democracy, praise undemocratic rulers, and have role models in representatives of totalitarian regimes. Various populist notions of politics are also contrary to liberalism (König, Siewert 2021). This is because populism is based on the people's will, on the only truth that the people represent. Liberalism, on the other hand, is based on plurality of opinion, on competition between different political actors, on openness to other opinions.

The Liberal as Enemy

If populism is built on one "right" truth, it stands to reason that the enemies of populists must include liberals. Although in the Slovak party system only two political parties – Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS) and Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia) – subscribe to liberalism, populists tend to use the word liberal to label all politicians who disagree with them, including representatives of conservative parties. Already in this context we can identify a shift in the meaning of the word liberal. Thus, a liberal is not a person who presents the ideas of liberalism; a liberal is a person who has an opposite view to that of the populists. The Vice-President of the Smer-SD political party and current MEP regularly uses the confusion of terms when, on

the one hand, he refers to politicians with terms such as liberal or neoliberal, regardless of their party affiliation, and later on, he is still able to classify individual politicians and political parties correctly. However, liberal (or neoliberal) in his (and not only in his) understanding is a concept that exists independently of a particular ideology.

> – "***Liberals*** *in Western countries are facing an existential crisis ... In Germany, the SPD has experienced an absolute defeat*" (Blaha, L., 24. 6. 2024, Telegram).
> – "*The **neoliberal majority** in the Council approved it without a vote, and Slovakia harshly criticized these nominations ... The right-wing People's Party won the Euro elections and it is forcing its way through Leyen*" (Blaha, Ľ., 24. 6. 2024, Telegram).
> – "*Progressives, KDH, and nationalists voted in Brussels to abolish the veto for Slovakia ...* ***Let's stop liberalism!*** *Let's save Slovakia*" (Uhrík, M., 18.9.2024, Telegram).

According to the populists, free media is an important enemy of the nation. This is because the free media support the system of liberal democracy and draw attention to the various half-truths or outright lies that the populists spread in the public space. Populists are particularly critical of the opinion media because they have the most significant influence on the formation of public opinion. Populists see the traditional media as part of an elite that does not represent the interests of the people but of certain people or groups. Populists criticize the media for not delivering the truth, but constantly lying. Populists accuse the media of lacking legitimacy, credibility, and objectivity. There are views that the media have power over public opinion and manipulate citizens in the interests of particular groups (Reinemann 2017).

In the Slovak context, there were open attempts to influence the nature of political debates after the formation of the fourth Fico government. Representatives of coalition parties refused to participate in TV debates with their opponents from the opposition, so TV executives canceled some discussion shows and terminated employment relationships with critical editors. The coalition passed a law to abolish public broadcasting and to create a new media institution. In this way, it could dismiss the former director of television and radio and install its appointees in public radio and television management.

The populists present the opinion media as *traitorous, paid from abroad, Soros* (for a more detailed discussion of resemantization and demonization of symbolic precedent names, see Duleba, Dulebová 2021), *corrupt, and*

anti-Slovak, referring to journalists with derogatory terms like prostitutes and (American) agents. In the past, Slovak populists mainly distinguished between mainstream and alternative media. Only the media from the latter group were supposed to bring the truth, although the public did not know the owners of these media, the names of the editors or the way they were financed. A characteristic feature of these media was that they did not give a voice to the politicians or political parties they criticized.

After 2020, the term used to describe the first group of media – the mainstream – is slipping into the background, and populists are beginning to use the term liberal media. Liberal media, in the populist sense, is not synonymous with free media but with media that lie and manipulate. In this case, the term *liberal* is not used in its original meaning but takes on a new meaning with a negative connotation.

> – "*The liberal media is doing what it always does.* **They lie. They manipulate**" (Blaha, L., 29. 07. 2021, Facebook).
> – "*The* **liberal** *and progressive media and their servants in the opposition parties are once again doing everything they can to shoot at a representative of the ruling coalition*" (Fico, R., 29. 07. 2021, Facebook).

Current Slovak populists also consider NGOs a significant enemy of the nation. After the 2023 parliamentary elections, the new government has often presented the view that the activities of some NGOs should be restricted. The new governing coalition has begun to distinguish between good and bad NGOs. Good NGOs are those dedicated to charity, social affairs, health, etc. On the contrary, bad NGOs control public finances and the transparency of political decision-making, draw attention to the corruption of politicians, or publish their comments on the legislative process. Populists criticize the activities of these NGOs and consider them evil and hostile. For this reason, government populists are also referred to as "liberal NGOs":

> – „**Liberal NGOs** *have been drugging, scribbling on walls, and organizing LGBT marches here with state money...* **Liberal NGOs** *were stealing from the state like* **cancer**... **liberal extremists** *from NGOs*" (Kramplová, D. 10. 5. 2024, NR SR).

A favorite populist term to describe people with a critical or oppositional mindset towards the governing coalition is the phrase *liberal café*:

– "*Mr. Ján Čarnogurský Jr. is a lawyer who is not afraid to defend even those whom the **liberal café** thinks have no rights*" (Taraba, T., 7. 9. 2020, Facebook).

– "*The **liberal cafe** has found a new, but unsubstantiated, fanciful wave here...*" (Kéry, M., 10 Aug. 2024, Facebook).

Populists often use terms associated with undemocratic regimes to emphasize their negative attitude towards liberalism. The oxymoron liberal fascism is often used, but we also find such expressions as *liberal terrorism, liberal totalitarianism,* or *liberal extremism*:

– "*The years 2020 to 2023 in our country have clearly defined and shown the true face of **liberal extremism**... This was and is the true face of the liberals from NGOs, who in the years 2020 to 2023 infiltrated the state structures and created **liberal totalitarianism** comparable to any other totalitarianism*" (Kramplová, D., 10 May 2024, NR SR).

– "***Liberalism has turned into a totalitarian ideology** that defends only the freedom of the rich and powerful, no one else*" (Blaha, Ľ., 7. 7. 2024, Telegram).

If a Slovak radical populist uses the adjective *liberal* (or in the form of *neoliberal*), he often associates it with a word with a negative connotation:

– "*I know we will make the **liberal mafia** nervous*" (Blaha, Ľ., 22. 2. 2022, Facebook).

- "*...in which all **liberal poisons** and **progressive viruses** are expunged from the body of our state ... in the case of the Churilloliberal mafia... liberal perversions*" (Blaha, L., 7. 7. 2024, Telegram).

– "*The **neoliberal cancer** must be stopped – its source is here. Doctor Blaha has arrived, the cure begins*" (Blaha, Ľ., 16. 7. 2024, Telegram).

In populist communication strategies, liberals, or those who are labeled with this word by populists, act as scapegoats who are blamed for all possible negative phenomena in society (for price increases, shortages of certain goods and services, migrants, the feeling of being threatened, for the war in Ukraine and its victims, for hatred, corruption, poverty, even for the pandemic and the victims of the pandemic). The scapegoats can be different groups of people: minorities, Jews, Hungarians, Czechs, Roma, often immigrants, but they can also be women, NGOs, media, and conservatives. These

attitudes, based on prejudices and stereotypes, vary depending on historical traditions and the national, regional or local context in which they are used (Wodak 2014). Scapegoating creates justification for the spread of hate speech and prejudice, specifically against selected groups (Muller 2021). In the examples below, liberals act as scapegoats:

– "*Unknown perpetrators sprayed the memorial to Andrej Hlinka, the father of the Slovak nation…. and spray-painted the pedestal with the inscription Roma lives matter... Let's stop the **liberal madness**!*" (Mazurek, M., 23 June 2020, NR SR).

– "*The state has fallen into a state of absolute decay due **to liberals infiltrating** ministries and state bodies*" (Kramplová, D., 10. 5. 2024, NR SR).

– "*They are progressives and liberals of all kinds. It is they who spread extremist hatred; it is they who sow the evil that results in such assassinations ... Let's face it - the hatred that led to the assassination of Donald Trump is the result of **liberal hatred**" (Blaha, L., 14. 7. 2024, Telegram).

After the 2023 general election, the adjective *progressive* began to appear alongside the term liberal. This communication strategy is a reaction to the popularity after the 2023 elections of the strongest opposition political party - Progressive Slovakia. The PS openly supports the LGBTI+ community, has an open approach to gay rights, and understands modern trends in art, which is why populists sometimes accuse the PS of having perverse goals and do not forget to remind us that these are *liberal (liberal-progressive)* perversions:

– "*His challenge is clear – let's build a dam against the **perverse progressivist ideologies**. Let's build a dam against **liberal extremists**. **Progressivism** is spreading **like cancer** in the West*" (Blaha, L., July 5, 2024, Telegram).

- "*...I point out the aggressive pushing of such **liberal-progressive perversion**s*" (Plevíková, Z., 6. 8. 2024, Facebook).

– "*Children and young people should be protected from inappropriate content and from the constant pressure of **liberal-progressive propaganda** which forcefully pushes into their consciousness topics with sexual overtones*" (Šimkovičová, M., 19. 8. 2024, Facebook).

Conclusions

Although liberalism is an ideology whose achievements include the extension of suffrage, pluralist democracy, and a competitive party system, both left and right-wing populists generally use terms like *liberal* or *liberalism* in a negative sense. Populists use the word *liberal* to label opposition-minded politicians, regardless of their ideological anchorage. Populists use the word liberal to refer to the opposition or the enemy of *the Slovak*, *national* or *Christian*. Thus, in the populists' communication strategies, the liberal is not a sympathizer of liberalism and liberal values (primarily individual freedom and personal responsibility) but is presented by the populists as a person who opposes the *nation*. Populists can thus use the term liberal to label even a person who has voted for conservative or Christian Democratic parties for many years. However, because he opposes populist parties, he is presented as a *liberal*.

The Slovak populists who formed the government after the 2023 elections use the adjective liberal to emphasize something negative. They use the adjective liberal to express their negative attitude toward the media, NGOs, certain political parties, and individual politicians. For Slovak populists, the adjective liberal is synonymous with such adjectives as bad, harmful, corrupt, etc.

The examples given in the text prove the shifting meaning of the word liberal. Populists replace the original meaning of the word not only with another but with an oppositional meaning. In their world, liberal is not a synonym for the adjectives tolerant and open but for negative phenomena, processes, persons, institutions, and organizations.

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