



**DYNAMICS OF NEW CHALLENGER PARTIES IN SLOVAKIA'S
PARTY SYSTEM**

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Abstract

Slovakia's party system has been known for the frequent emergence and breakthrough of new parties. With the exception of 2006, in all elections since 1998 a party created shortly before elections succeeded in passing the threshold of parliamentary representation.

Practically all of these new contestants were anti-establishment parties (A-E) with one exception of party which we can label anti-system (A-S). This paper makes an inquiry into one aspect of the dynamics of relationship between the traditional and challenger parties, namely whether voters perceive A-E parties as such, that is as distinct and separate from the traditional ones. The analysis covers the period until the 2020 general election.

Key words: challenger party, anti-establishment, anti-system party, public perception

INTRODUCTION

Slovakia's party system – like many post-communist party systems – has been known for the frequent emergence and breakthrough of new parties in parliamentary elections (Henderson 2002; Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2015; Rovny 2015; Engler et al., 2019). Except for 2006, in all elections since 1998 parties created shortly before elections have succeeded in passing the threshold of parliamentary representation. Some of these new parties consequently participated in governmental coalitions as well. Practically all of these new contestants were anti-establishment parties with one exception that – as we will argue – is an anti-system party.

Recently, much social scientific literature has emphasized the programmatic and discursive diversity of anti-establishment and populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia. Sarah Engler et al. point out that not all “populist parties are to be found on radical positional fringes” and that the “threat posed by antiestablishment parties is not immediate or universal” (Engler et al., 2019: 20).

In this text, we are interested in new parties, which have emerged since the late 1990s, but we are not in all of the new parties. Our focus is on parties that managed to get into parliament in spite of being established relatively shortly prior to the elections.¹ Further, these were not simply new parties or anti-incumbent parties. (After all, all new and opposition parties running in elections are by definition anti-incumbent.) These parties based their appeals in varying form and degree on criticism of the established parties or indeed of the entire system of party interactions. They, in one way or another, anti-establishment (party-political) actors. They are anti-establishment in their ideas and appeals as well as in their practices and conduct. We call them challenger parties as we characterize “the challenge” as

¹ The only exception being Kotleba-People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) that was created as a political organization in 2009-2010 but its breakthrough only happened in the 2016 elections after the party had developed its distinct anti-systemic appeal (for more details about the rise of this political party see: Harris 2019).

publicly doubting the capacity and/or will of traditional parties to represent people and govern the state optimally, or even sufficiently. In order to be defined as challenger parties, their challenge must have had become part of their public appeal upon their inception and electoral breakthrough. Their distance from the established actors is a frequent feature of the new parties that need to justify their reason for competing for votes. Indeed, many newcomers exhibit anti-establishment inclinations. While many new parties can be considered anti-establishment parties, not all anti-establishment parties are newcomers. These parties may have retained their challenger status in the next elections, as well as they may have diluted or lost it and merge into the mainstream. Finally, they may have disappeared as the distinct political organizations at all.

Practically all of these parties have at been labeled “populist” a certain point, but we are convinced that the concept of anti-establishment politics captures their essence much better. In the past, both authors used to employ the term “centrist populism” (Učeň et al., 2005) while analyzing the parties at issue. We stopped using the term as we realized it was an approach with a limited explanatory potential. While it was representative of the level of our research more than a decade ago, today it is clearly obsolete as more accurate concepts have become available over time (see, for example, Hanley & Sikk, 2016). Indeed, most of the new challengers in question were what Hanley & Sikk (2016) call “anti-establishment reform parties” (AERPs).

Nevertheless, the term “challenger parties,” as used here, is by no means meant to be either a new party type or a party family. Rather, it is a technical term – an empirical class – helping us to analytically cope with the excess of dynamics and turnover in the contemporary party systems in (not only) post-communist Europe. Such a category in general includes anti-establishment parties, anti-system parties and possibly any other parties complying with the characteristics above. It is a broader category than Hanley’s and Sikk’s AERPs and it is different than what Pop-Eleches (2010) characterized as an “unorthodox party”. He defines

unorthodox parties by their deviation from a consensus on certain substance of politics: “A political party is classified as mainstream if its electoral appeal is based on a recognizable and moderate ideological platform rather than on the personality of its leader and/or extremist rhetoric”. (Pop-Eleches 2010, p. 255) His approach is not relational, but instead it “defines unorthodox parties using an international reference point—the West European moderate programmatic party” (Pop-Eleches 2010, p. 256). Our characteristic of a challenger party emphasizes any challenge to the established “ways of doing (party) politics”. Hobolt and Tilly conceptualize “challenger parties” as those “that challenge the mainstream party’s political consensus” (Hobolt & Tilly 2016, p. 4). In addition, they analyze the degree to which a party has government responsibility for political outcomes for which they can be held to account (ibid).

This paper summarizes the results of the general inquiry into the conditions of emergence and breakthrough of the most important challenger parties in the Slovak party system. Particularly, we want to know what the different generations of anti-establishment challengers in the Slovak party politics were and what were their political projects, resources and opportunity structure upon their breakthrough. This paper also makes an inquiry into one aspect of the dynamics of relationship between the traditional and new challenger parties; namely whether voters perceived newcomers to the party-political scene as distinct and separate from the traditional parties and among themselves.

I. THREE GENERATIONS OF CHALLENGER PARTIES IN THE SLOVAK PARTY SYSTEM AFTER 1998

The story of the Slovak challenger parties starts in what Pop-Eleches (2010) calls the third generation of elections in which post-communist voters support in greater extent so-called

“unorthodox parties”, which departed from the broad geopolitical and domestic politics consensus to which parties in the first two generations of elections largely adhered.

In the Slovak case, it was the era of late 1990s when the highly polarized conflict culminated pitching the civic-democratic parties of then opposition against the attempted hollowing of Slovak liberal democracy by the coalition of the (national-populist) parties lead by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (Krause 2006, Učeň 2010). This conflict was resolved in 1998 parliamentary elections, when the united opposition coupled with the remarkable mobilization of civil society made it possible to exclude Mečiar’s party from government. While his party, the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), remained the largest single party in the parliament, the united opposition was able to form a winning coalition with the help of the newly emerged Civic Understanding Party (SOP). SOP, an enabler of the anti-Mečiarist coalition, was also the first from the line of challenger parties benefiting from the specific criticism of the Slovak political establishment, and pioneer of the first wave of such challengers.

In describing the three generations of challenger parties that entered Slovak party politics since 1998, we are inspired by Lucardie (2000). His text is best known for the typology of new parties that has been adopted and applied to different contexts in numerous academic articles. He identifies ideal types of new political parties: (1) “prophetic” parties, which articulate new ideologies, (2) “purifiers” or challengers whose ambition is to “cleanse” the political system of corruption; (3) “prolocutors”, which represent interests neglected by established parties; and finally (4) “personal vehicles” (or idiosyncratic parties) (Lucardie 2000). We, however, refer to the framework in which Lucardie presents new parties including their *political projects*, their *resources* and *political opportunity structure* upon their emergence and breakthrough (ibid.).

I. 1 The First Generation: Self-Professed De-Polarizers (1998-2002)

In the late 1990s it became profitable for the new parties to campaign on by appealing to their distance from both of the main political camps— authoritarian nationalists represented by Movement for a Democratic Slovakia lead by Vladimír Mečiar and liberal pro-reform, pro-integration, center right political parties, whose struggle had been defining Slovak politics for most of the decade. Most of the voters' mass found it appropriate to choose sides in the conflict between the pro-liberal democratic opposition parties and the illiberal ruling coalition with authoritarian leanings. However, there was a small, but not negligible segment of the electorate, that was willing to reward appeals claiming that the polarizing conflict between liberals and authoritarians should be stopped. The **Civic Understanding Party (SOP)**, **Direction (Smer)** nowadays called **Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD)**, and **New Citizen Alliance (ANO)** belonged to the generation of depolarizers. The strategy was spearheaded in 1998 by the SOP, which attacked the mainstream “from the middle”, and claimed to bridge the fundamental conflict. In 1999, Smer appeared, rejecting the dominant conflict as such, and attacking the mainstream on the claim that “politics of the common sense” would benefit people more than the polarization. Finally, when the anti-Mečiar coalition that clustered around the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) electoral party failed to meet the expectations of the reform-minded electorate, ANO popped up in 2002 to blame the mainstream for the lack of integrity and suggested that those who replaced authoritarian Mečiar might not be that different.

The most important feature of the first generation of challengers was their political project directly referring and distancing themselves from the polarized conflict of 1990s and its assumed pernicious consequences for the Slovak politics and society. It included more or less sincere appeals to reconciliation and overcoming or healing the consequences of polarization. This was particularly true for SOP and Smer. ANO, which was created later,

may be considered a forbearer of the political project of the following, second generation of challengers, particularly SaS party.

Even though the parties differed in preferences and accents, the essence of their “centrist populist” appeal (Učeň 2003, Učeň et al. 2005) was the claim that by engaging in the intense conflict in the late 1990s the “old” elite somehow betrayed their democratic commitment to the people, who suffered as the consequence of the polarization. By the same token, by virtue of distancing themselves from the antagonistic politics,² new depolarizers presented themselves as *hominis novi* morally eligible to replace the old (party) elites and rule the country.

The variety of arguments on this theme is captured in Table 1, column “Political projects”.

TABLE 1: Conditions of Breakthrough: The First Generation

	<i>Political project</i>	<i>Resources</i>	<i>Political opportunity structure</i>
SOP (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoring nation's (moral) unity and harmony (as a reaction to the dominant highly polarized conflict) • The call for overcoming the polarization and enmity in politics • Prolocutor; interests of the neglected Slovak people longing for a deserving a harmonic political relationship rather than ceaseless conflict offered by the “established” alternatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social capital of its members • Well known and popular leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly polarized political conflict of the two irreconcilable camps within the party system

² By standing somewhere in between the camps of the old conflict, therefore beyond it.

Smer (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoring national unity and harmony (as a reaction to the dominant highly polarized conflict); the call for overcoming the polarization and enmity in politics • Criticism of “ideological approach to politics”; promotion of “common sense solutions” • Efficient state, criticizing immobilism of the sitting elite; proposing more emphasis on law and order issues • Call for replacement of the elite with <i>homini novi</i> / new faces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular leader • Financial support from some Mečiar-era oligarchs who invested in the new project for the post-Mečiar times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular demand among the sizeable group of voters for conciliatory politics and end of the conflict • Novelty sentiment; sympathies of those who refused the policies of the new government but also rejected the return to Mečiar-era arrangements
ANO (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-establishment appeal combining the fear of Mečiar’s return with the suspicion that those who replaced him are not that much different • Experimenting with the combination of economic and life-style liberalism³ • Market liberal purifier: call for more efficient governance based on integrity of the holders of the public office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media support - from the country's most popular commercial TV station owned by the party leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New frustration emerged among the middle class concerning opportunism and corruption potential of the “reform coalition” of 1998-2002

Almost two decades past since the first generation of challengers came to existence. Since then only Smer-SD has managed to survive. It has not only survived; it has in fact to dominated and shaped Slovak party politics.

SOP gradually but inevitably fell apart after fulfilling its practical purpose – securing presidency of the state for its leader Rudolf Schuster. After a couple of years of hesitation about the possible ways of reinventing party appeals – unsuccessfully courting the left-liberalism – the party finally merged with Smer-SD in 2003. Its major legacy became the viability of the “third way” or “centrist populist” appeals taking distance from both

³ This combination has been fully embraced by SaS in 2010 election campaign. It is worthy of mentioning that some members of the youth organization of ANO were later among the members and activists of SaS.

mainstream alternatives of the existing order as well as the fact that party's success in 1998 elections made it possible to oust the illiberal coalition of PM Mečiar.

Smer has been electorally successful because of its organizational consolidation and ideological reinvention. This was, paradoxically, triggered by its relative electoral failure. Prior to the 2002 elections, the party's ambitions were quite high, as they had around 30 per cent in public opinion polls. The reality check came on election then the party only received 13.5 percent and failed to prevent the formation of the purely right-wing coalition. The new government included the participation of the newcomer ANO, which obtained 8 per cent. Following this fiasco, Smer reinvented itself and managed to build a lasting party organization dominated by the founding elites of the party's antiestablishment era. The restyled party avoided a breakdown by giving enough influence and incentives to the new ideological, generically leftist and as well as opportunistic rank and file. It merged with the remnants of the social-democratic left – including Social Democratic Party – thus monopolizing the left-wing pole of the political spectrum. This merger allowed Smer to acquire notable property by absorbing the Party of the Democratic left (SDL), which as the legal successor of the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) held a lot of property. Smer also succeeded in fluently moving from being a non-ideological, antiestablishment “party of the common sense”, to the position of a generally leftist defender of the people against the evils of governmental neoliberalism. It positioned itself as “the opposition against the anti-popular government of the Right” and re-branded itself as a social democratic party (hence Smer- Social Democracy as the official party name). Those were the essential assumptions of the party's success in the 2006 elections, when it managed to form a ruling “illiberal” coalition with the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the remnants of Mečiar's HZDS.

ANO entered the 2002 ruling coalition with other center-right parties (Slovak democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party/ SDKÚ-DS, Christian-democratic Movement/KDH and the ethnic minority Party of Hungarian Coalition/SMK) with great

ambitions and energy. However, it soon alienated coalition partners by its predatory and aggressive behavior and it also alienated its supporters by quickly deviating from its criticism of elite corruption by joining the ranks of the willing “captors of the state”. Also, the authoritarian style of party leader, Pavol Rusko, provoked an intra-party rebellion and split in 2005, which resulted in the coalition’s majority being seriously endangered. In a situation when the major senior coalition partner, SDKÚ-DS, has been also suffering from internal conflict, the government embarked upon a laborious and controversial coalition maintenance which allegedly included motivation of the members of the pro-coalition splinter from ANO by corrupt means with the help of business entities with interest in coalition’s survival.⁴ The desolate state of the right-wing coalition in 2005-2006 has become an important impetus for the formation of the second generation of challengers, which focused on the anti-corruption and the integrity of the governing. ANO itself, hopelessly marginalized, continued until 2011 when it was “sold” to a minor countryside entrepreneur and tabloid personality, who wished to run a party of her own, and consequently renamed it.

I. 2 Second Generation: Champions of Integrity (2009-2012)

The second generation of challengers presented a novel anti-establishment appeal that focused on anti-corruption, public interest and issues of integrity in ruling and governance. It included Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) movement.

This generation brought to politics a number of previously politically non-engaged personalities with a business background and often with notable personal wealth. Both parties were generally center-right if judged by the criteria of the traditional left-right perspective. Their special appeal, however, rested in their protest against the particularism of the Slovak

⁴ This has later become the central story of the so-called “Gorilla Case” based on the leaked unofficial transcripts of the Slovak Intelligence Service’s wiretapping of the business group at issue.

politics. They mobilized a largely younger generation of activists as a reaction to the deplorable state of the “traditional center-right” – represented by ANO and SDKÚ-DS, both plagued by discord and corruption accusations. Also, they were repulsed by the illiberal coalition government of Smer-SD, SNS and HZDS following the 2006 elections, which they had seen as the major threat for the chances of Slovakia to become prosperous and democratic country.

SaS emerged in 2009 from among the milieu of younger market liberals and business people objecting to the corruption pervading the system as well as dirigisme of the ruling coalition. The party was more technocratic and focused its attention mostly on fighting corruption by improving the rules (business environment, more honest management of public finance etc.). Party leaders were largely very competent managers and successful businesspeople. What was special was that party combined economic and lifestyle liberalism in its appeal as it argued for a notable increase in personal liberties as well. Many LGBT activists believed it was the first political party in Slovakia that was willing to support their cause, so many volunteered to work in the campaign. SaS benefited enormously from such volunteer support from the young professionals which, among other things, enabled party to develop an impressive campaign on the web and social media.

Even though OĽaNO appeared as the distinct party only in 2012, it had existed since 2009 as Ordinary People (OL). It began as a movement of four people around the leader Igor Matovič. Matovič – a self-described Christian with quite conservative leanings – and it developed a distinctive antiestablishment posture. It was based on the radical condemnation of corruption but compared to the technocratism of SaS it had a distinctly moralistic nature. Instead of focusing on improving the rules of the system like SaS, Matovič has proposed the overhaul of the old elite and changes in the system of representation. He criticized the monopoly of political parties in representation and nomination of the political personnel and branded its movement the electoral vehicle for independent candidates to be able to compete

for a place in the parliament. In essence, OĽaNO was – and still is – an antiparty. It declaratively doubts the party democracy as the organizational paradigm of liberal democracy, even though the “movement” is happy to perform the role of a political party in the public office.

As SaS was better organized and ready to contest the 2010 elections, SaS agreed to reserve some places for Ordinary People on the SaS ballot. The decision was far from unanimous in the party’s leadership because of Matovič’s radicalism, harsh rhetoric and proclivity toward street action and very expressive activism. Except for the shared anti-corruption spirit, the important argument might have been the asset Matovič was able to commit to the campaign. He owned a company that runs a successful advertisement newspaper, which is delivered to hundreds of thousand households around the country for free. Igor Matovič used to write a regular short political column in the newspaper in which he developed his anti-establishment posture and apparently created the following. This was manifested in the election results when OĽ members – who on their own request were placed to the very bottom of SaS’ ballot, numbers 147 to 150 – managed to rise to positions number four to seven because of preferential votes cast by for them.

Both new anti-establishment postures – the technocratic and moralist one – tapped into the electorate’s demand for anti-establishment parties, as their combined share in 2010 was almost 12 per cent of votes in 2010.⁵

⁵ In the snap elections in 2012 it was 14.5 percent and in 2016 it was 23 per cent.

TABLE 2: Conditions of Breakthrough: The Second Generation

	<i>Political project</i>	<i>Resources</i>	<i>Political opportunity structure</i>
SaS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for more honestly and efficiently run state, namely public finances • Anti-corruption drive & call for integrity of the holders of public office as the sine qua non of the good governance • Blaming all post-1998 establishment elites for the demise of public integrity and rise of corruption in the country • Market liberal purifier: defied the decay of market liberalism caused by previous coalition • Ideological appeal combining economic and social (lifestyle) liberalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and economic capital of the founders (undeniable professional expertise, personal wealth, new faces untainted by corruption) • Energy of highly skilled volunteer activists capable of running innovative campaigns both on the web and in the field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand for professional governance of the state resources and public sector free from corruption • Demand for a political party representing life-style liberalism (eg. sexual minorities) • Growing disappointment with both versions of the establishment order following the 1998 elections (embodied by Smer-SD versus SDKÚ-DS)
OLaNO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very strong anti-corruption drive (in terms of morality rather than efficiency and rules) • Anti-party, challenging the concept of party democracy as the organizational form of liberal democracy • A movement, presenting itself as a political vehicle for recruiting independent candidates to the parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader's wealth and support from the nation-wide network of advertising papers reaching most of the country's households • A convincing moral posture complemented by the happening style of politics (street action and inventive public protests) and resulting earned media attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing disappointment with both versions of the establishment order following the 1998 elections (embodied by Smer-SD and SDKÚ-DS parties.)

I. 3 Third generation: Democracy's cynics and revolutionaries of change (2016)

The third generation of challengers manifested itself in the 2016 parliamentary elections and brought in the strongest criticism of the establishment – or “the system” – so far. These new parties also showed the biggest skepticism regarding the desirability of liberal democracy.

It included We are Family (Sme rodina) as well as Kotleba - People's Party Our Slovakia (Kotleba - ĽSNS).⁶ While Sme rodina is a new party following roughly the logic according to which Slovak antiestablishment has been developing prior to each election since late 1990s, ĽSNS is a party created in 2010 which only made its breakthrough in 2016 after it developed its distinct anti-systemic appeal.

Sme rodina gained popularity prior to the 2016 elections, when Boris Kollár took it over. He is a minor oligarch, popular tabloid press protagonist with the chequered past (including connections with mobsters) and highly unconventional private life.⁷ Kollár embodied and articulated a strong but rather vague anti-establishment, anti-corruption creed of the new party in a moralistic way somehow resembling the pathos of Matovič and OĽaNO. The party's appeal was complemented with the addition to the leadership of Milan Krajniak, a conservative (reborn) Christian formerly from the broader Christian democratic milieu. He presented a doctrine of purification of conservatism in the country that contrasted to the adulterated conservatism of the mainstream, which, according to him, fails because it shuns hierarchies, authority and the idea of the state reason. Krajniak made this appeal compatible with Kollár's anti-establishment posture and general pro-family values claims. A hasty recruitment of the "available" anti-establishment cadres resulted in the early split within the party's parliamentary caucus when three of its eleven MPs left and de facto crossed the aisle and started to vote with the ruling coalition. Since then, however, party seemed to be united.

Kotleba-ĽSNS is historically the party of ultra-nationalism. It was established in 2009 by radical Slovak nationalists with a record of engagement with the modern neo-Nazi ideas. In addition, the party has also used the propaganda of the traditional Slovak clerical- and authoritarian nationalism of the independent Slovak State era (1939-1945). However, these cadres learned the lesson that the direct introduction of the extremist ideas into their political

⁶ The party was created by takeover and transformation of the existing minuscule joke party in 2010 and renamed to People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). In 2016 the surname of the party leader Marian Kotleba was added to the party name.

⁷ Kollár has so far fathered ten children with nine different women none of which he is married to.

program results in a backlash, as in 2006 their previous electoral vehicle, Slovak Togetherness - National Party (SP-NS) was banned. Therefore, the anti-democratic ideas were eliminated from the party program which effectively exhibits the traits of the radical right manifesto for the public consumption. Moreover, the popular appeal of the party is based neither primarily on its extremism, nor even necessarily on its ultra nationalism, but rather to a great degree it is based on a distinct and complex anti-systemic appeal, which has gradually developed around the party and its leader Marian Kotleba.

This anti-systemic mood includes various kinds of criticism of “the system”. While never clearly defined, party appeals do not equate “the system” to (liberal) democracy as such. Rather, they allude to the entire structure of institutions, practices and interactions negligent and treacherous anti-national elites and external actors forced onto the Slovak nation after the 1989 regime change. Therefore, the Kotlebistas’ criticism includes “performance-based” aspects as well as moralistic condemnation of the elite failures in the vein of traditional right-wing populist and anti-establishment actors. Radical nationalist disdain for the system decimating Slovak nation economically, morally and physically is an inevitable part of their criticism, along with a fair share of dog-whistling to the idea that democracy may not be the best or preferable form of government for the Slovak nation.

TABLE 3: Conditions of Breakthrough: The Third Generation

	<i>Political project</i>	<i>Resources</i>	<i>Political opportunity structure</i>
<i>Sme rodina</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong anti-establishment appeal portraying the vital failure – or deceitful intent – of elites (including the previous “alternative” represented by Smer-SD) • Conservative purifier: arguing for the necessity to introduce true, unsullied conservatism into Slovak politics (family values, state reason, authority and hierarchy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular leader, a rich entrepreneur and a very well-known tabloid media celebrity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth of the radical anti-systemic camp within the public opinion. • Disappointment of the anti-establishment voters with the politics of Smer-SD and the demise of image of Robert Fico as the popular anti-establishment redeemer among the anti-establishment voters
ĽSNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radical right program for the public consumption combined with the allusions of anti-democratic revisionism for the privy audience • A distinct and complex anti-system appeal consisting of various more indirect references to more radical criticism of the post-1989 order • Strong criticism of the elite corruption • Strong anti-zyganism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated and ideologically highly motivated campaign activists. • A lot of earned free media attention as a consequence of controversies surrounding party’s extremist history, street action-oriented campaigning and controversial public policy proposals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The success of the party leader Marian Kotleba in 2013 gubernatorial elections as the precedent for the previously demoralized anti-systemic opinion camp

There are similar reasons for the rise of both of the third’s generation challenger parties. These include primarily the emergence of the sizeable anti-systemic camp in the Slovak public opinion. Always present in public opinion, the camp has consolidated itself after 2010 as a consequence of Facebook activism from below and the rise of its charismatic political leaders such as Marian Kotleba and his ĽSNS party from above. The third generation gained strength because those voters holding anti-establishment views continued to be disappointed over the political situation. Another factor was the demise Smer-SD leader and PM Robert

Fico image as the popular redeemer – an image which a part of such constituency may have been previously preserving. By burying the hope that redemption might come from within the government structures, Fico asserted an opinion among many anti-systemic and anti-establishment voters that the demand for a more radical challenge to the system was necessary. Voting for *Sme rodina* and Kotleba-ĽSNS is often considered an act in this direction but this act includes two different groups of alienated voters.

II. Is Radicalization of Anti-Establishment the Case?

Gyárfášová (2018) argued that the third generation of challengers also marks the tendency of the shift in the nature of the challenge from the anti-establishment to the politics of anti-systemness. She concluded that it is appropriate to treat ĽSNS as an anti-systemic party, arguing that it manifests both ideological and relational anti-systemness as conceptualized by Capoccia (2002). As for *Sme rodina*, because of this pro-authority aspect of the party appeal, both public and punditry tended to consider it an ilk of the anti-systemic Kotleba-ĽSNS party, but this view has been largely revised since then. The party presented itself as a part of the systemic opposition and with some important exceptions it has been accepted as such.

According to the theoretical framework of anti-system political parties (Sartori 1976; Capoccia 2002), Kotleba-ĽSNS displays all attributes of anti-systemness. In Capoccia's terms, "the assessment of relational anti-systemness is based on a general evaluation of a party's coalition and propaganda strategies, rather than on its location on the ideological space – although all examples share the common property of being located at one extreme of the competitive space" (Capoccia 2002, pp. 24-25). In other words, a party which demonstrates relational and ideological anti-systemness adopts "isolationist" strategies, tends to build a separate pole of the system and refuses to enter coalitions. Most significantly, it systematically opposes and discredits the founding values of the regime, on which all other parties agree (cf.

Capoccia 2002, p. 25). A party that meets the conditions of relational and ideological anti-systemness is classified as a typical anti-system party.

Our analysis of public opinion data on perception of parties confirmed that Kotleba-ĽSNS effectively established a separate, third pole of the Slovak party space⁸ Similarly, all other parties in the parliament have treated it as a pariah.⁹ It reciprocated with adopting isolationist strategies and systematically opposing some founding values of the regime on which the other parties agree. For example, with regard to questions of Slovakia's core geopolitical orientation, Kotleba-ĽSNS demands Slovakia's exit from the EU and NATO, and initiated a petition collecting signatures for holding a referendum on these topics. The party also opposes basic principles of human rights as it rejects minority rights and makes anti-Semitic allusions. Moreover, it makes dehumanizing proclamations about the Roma minority – promising to protect people from “Gypsy extremists” and calling the Roma “parasites” (Kotleba 2016, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, the party opposes the democratic historical tradition of the Slovak Republic represented by the 1944 Slovak National Uprising against the regime of the Slovak war time state which it labels a betrayal on the Slovak nation.

ĽSNS is a radical right-wing party which, however, draws advantages from being a political spearhead of the anti-systemic camp. While it has been challenged on this account by other anti-systemic aspirants, at the level of the party support we see intense party loyalty. Also, the electorate is very homogeneous in terms of their opinions and they are clearly ideologically distant from any other voters' groups. The voters feel a high proximity to party's views and values and are certain about their intention to vote for it again. These characteristics differ very clearly from any other electorates cf. Gyárfášová 2018).

Therefore, a tentative conclusion is that post-2012 election period opened the space for both further development of anti-establishment politics. This includes *Sme rodina*, which

⁸ At the level of the ĽSNS electorate (Gyárfášová 2018).

⁹ While de facto cordon sanitaire has been established around the party, ĽSNS is ready to bargain on single issues, and it has been approached by other parties, both coalition and opposition, to bargain on some.

claims to support a purifying type of conservatism”. It is reasonable to assume that the example of Kotleba- ĽSNS will be emulated by other pretenders. In fact, even before its 2016 breakthrough the status of Kotleba’s party has been challenged on a number of occasions by parties that are even more radically nationalist., However, they failed to establish a viable political project and inevitably conceded the leadership to Kotleba by accepting places on his party list in 2016. An example is the case of the neo-Nazi extremists around Marian Mišún, who stood as number 88 on Kotleba’s list and ran a quasi-separate campaign with a group of three fellow-extremists. Similarly, one of the defining struggles in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in early 2020 was the contest over the leadership of the anti-systemic camp with a new contender in the race: the rejuvenated throwback of the Mečiarist nationalism, Štefan Harabin. He has been challenging Kotleba’s dominance so successfully that the ĽSNS leader had to split the anti-systemic vote in the presidential elections (March 2019) by running personally “against” Harabin and possibly preventing him from reaching the second round.

III. VOTERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL AND CHALLENGER PARTIES

In this section we want to focus on the following issues: Did voters perceived new challenger parties as distinct from the traditional parties? Also, did respondents perceived any differences among the challenger parties – within the same generation as well as between the different generations of them? How the voters of traditional parties and anti-establishment parties seen the anti-system challenger ĽSNS? And finally, was there any difference in 2016 perception between the latest generation of challengers (ĽSNS and Sme rodina) and the previous generation of anti-establishment challengers?

In order to find answers, we work with three data sets, namely the 2010 general election post-election CSES survey (June-July 2010); the pre-election CSES survey conducted

2 months before the early general election in March 2012 (January 2012), and the post-election CSES survey conducted six months after the general election 2016. The public's perception of the political parties is operationalized as like-dislike attitudes measured on an 11-points scale. The same question with an identical scale was used in all three surveys. Unfortunately, there were no comparable data available from the period prior to 2010 so it was not possible to cover the first generation of challengers at the time of their inception and breakthrough. However, there are several empirical studies about their high popularity and trustworthiness in Slovakia's electorate (for more details see: Učėň et al., 2005; Gyárfášová & Krivý, 2007). In all three surveys the same question – like-dislike in the scale 0-10 – has been asked about 7-8 relevant political parties (and about parliamentary parties in post-election polls). Due to high party volatility only four out of all together 12 parties were included into all three surveys, three parties are in two survey and five parties only in one survey. Table 4 summarizes relevant results from them.

TABLE 4: Voters' Attitudes to Parties on the Like-Dislike Scale in 2010, 2012 and 2016

Parties	2010	2012	2016
Slovak National Party (SNS)	3.25	3.37	4.61
Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	5.51	5.45	4.39
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	4.06	3.17	4.13
Bridge (Most-Híd)	4.13	3.48	4.12
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO)	-	3.77	3.66
People's Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS)	-	-	3.31
We Are Family (Sme rodina)	-	-	3.31
Network (#Siet')	-	-	2.94
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	4.52	3.80	-
People's Party – Movement for Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS)	2.73	-	-
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ-DS)	4.54	3.15	-
Party of the Magyar Community (SMK)	1.84	-	-

Note: Averages on the 11-point scale as a response to “What do you think about the following political parties? Please rate them on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means you strongly like that party” (averages for years 2010, 2012, and 2016, sorted by 2016; challenger parties highlighted).

Sources: CSES Slovakia 2010 and 2016. Institute for Public Affairs, 2012.

Firstly, let's examine the views of the overall public (voters of different parties as well as non-voters) on all surveyed political parties across the three elections.

In 2010, when SaS entered the scene, we see that the like-dislike spectrum was defined by Smer-SD on one side and the ethnic Magyar SMK on the other. Smer-SD peaked in its popularity that year and the deep dislike of the SMK was mostly determined by the ethnic distance of the Slovak majority towards party represented the Magyar minority. Even though only Smer ranked above five, two other traditional parties – SDKÚ-DS and KDH – had slight disapproval ratings. SNS had a lower score that year, perhaps because it was then seen as being a rather radical, nationalistic party, but has since shed that image. Meanwhile, HZDS scored low on the like-dislike scale because it was already on its way to oblivion. SaS as a new, liberal challenger, scored slightly below the traditional parties on its entry year and had a very good electoral result addressing mostly young voters and being the first party, which used the social networks massively in its mobilizing campaign. All in all, the negative attitude of general public towards political parties has not been directed to the new anti-establishment challenger, SaS, but rather to the ethnic appeal-based parties (more the Hungarian than the Slovak one) and on the unpopular and declining ĽS-HZDS.

In 2012, the results reflect the situation before the early election after the center-right government lost a vote of confidence in Parliament in October 2011. The center-right voters were angry at the parties in this coalition and punished them electorally, particularly SaS, which has been often been blamed for bringing about the demise of the center-right government. Smer-SD utilized the situation and scored the best electoral result in the history of the Slovak democratic politics – 44,4%, which produced an overall majority in the parliament. The newcomer of this election – anti-establishment party *par excellence* - OĽaNO – split from SaS and scored comparatively high, having all the advantages of newness. It was not rewarded so much with electoral support (8.55% of votes); however, the public image of this anti-party has been relatively positive.

The 2016 post-election survey showed above all the incredible trajectory of the SNS becoming the most liked party in 2016 after being almost the least liked in 2010. This was especially caused by its shift from the radical to the more moderate nationalistic position as well as the removal of its party chairman Ján Slota. The favorability of Smer-SD notably declined, while the two “older” anti-establishment parties SaS and OĽaNO captured the middle ground and all three brand new parties were located on the bottom of the public’s ranking. However, there were different reasons for that. The party #Siet’ – the youngest coalition partner of the newly built government – faced personal crises and practically dissolved and merged into Most-Híd. Two new parties in the national parliament – Sme rodina and Kotleba-ĽSNS – received equally low values of likeness – lowest of all the parties except for #Siet’.

The overall tentative conclusion is that in 2010 and 2012 voters did not necessarily perceived new, challenger parties as distinct – worse or better – than the established parties. The situation was slightly different in 2016, when the public perceived the newcomers as the least favorable party-political actors.

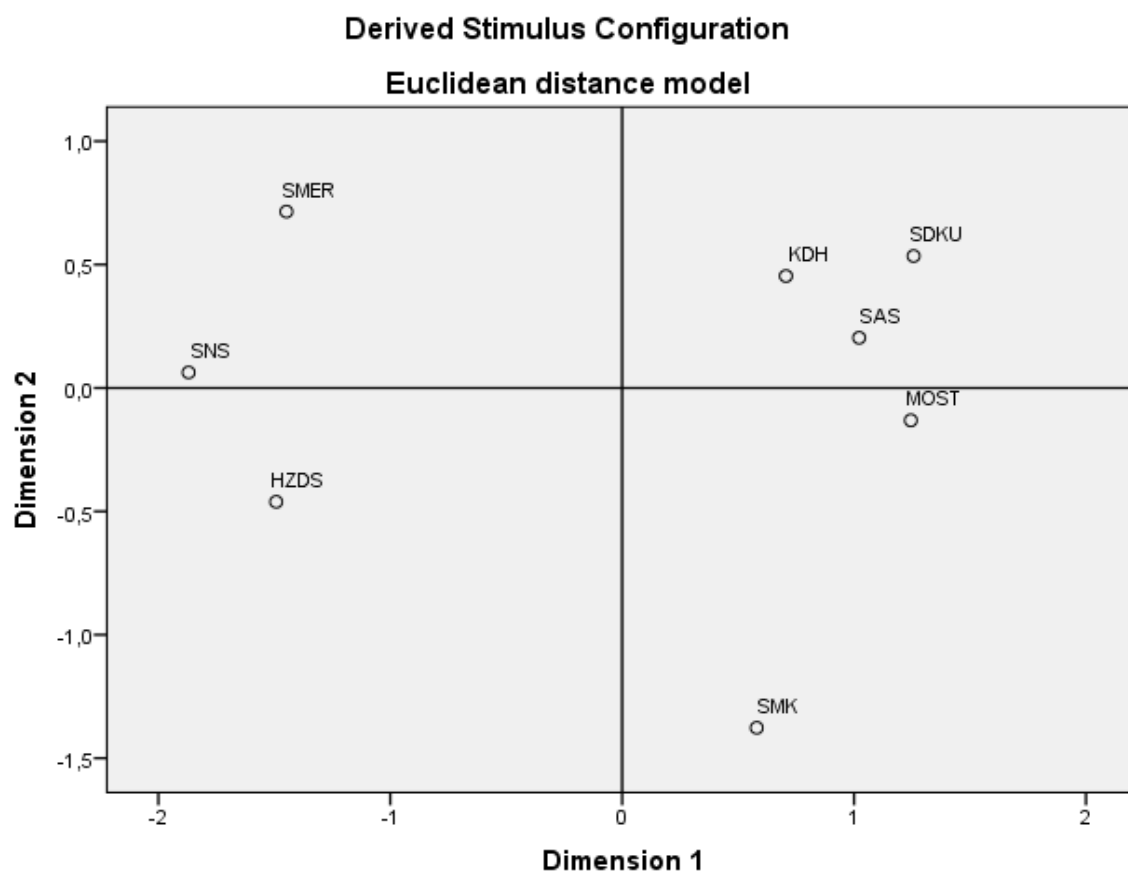
III.1 How Different Electorates Liked or Disliked Parties

To look deeper into the mutual relations of different types of voters and the parties’ perception, Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) analysis¹⁰ has been carried out using the matrix of voter groups’ evaluations of individual parties. Below are three two dimensional charts presenting the MDS results for each election year (2010, 2012 and 2016) calculated as the correlation matrix. Multidimensional scaling orders parties in two-dimensional space

¹⁰ In general, the goal of the Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) analysis is to detect meaningful underlying dimensions that allow explaining observed similarities or dissimilarities (distances) between the investigated objects and to visualize them. The results of correlations represent a proximity matrix. The Euclidean distance is the straight-line distance between two points x and y in Euclidean space. How the dimensions of the embedding correspond to dimensions of the analyzed phenomenon is upon the heuristic judgment of the researcher. MDS is similar to factor analysis – both uncover hidden patterns or relationships in data (for more details see: Kruskal & Wish, 1978).

visualizing the proximity among them based on how the parties are perceived – dis/liked - by voters. Objects that are more similar (or have shorter distances) are closer together on the graph than objects that are less similar (or have longer distances). By means of MDS we can see the map of public parties' perception (a kind of “perceptual map”) structured by two dimensions.

FIGURE 1: Location of political parties in two-dimensional space according to the MDS analysis in 2010



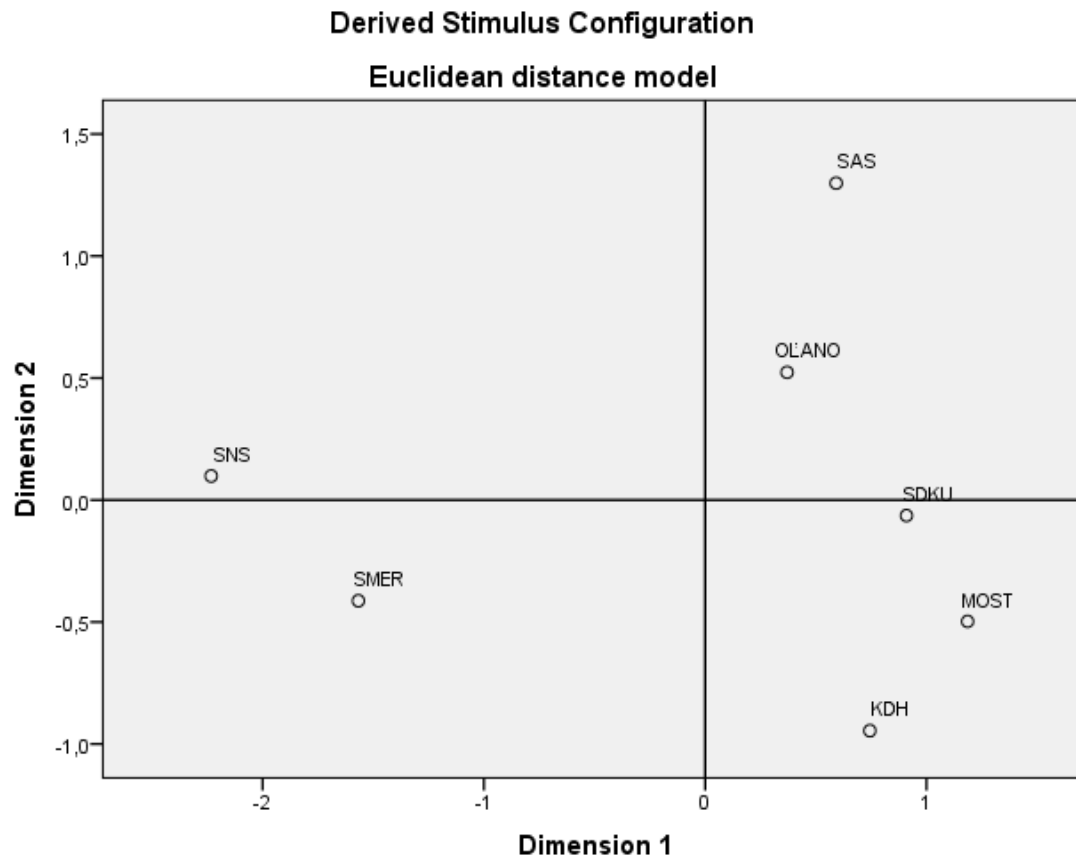
Source: CSES Slovakia, 2010.

In 2010 the post-election survey was carried out a few days after the election, but before the coalition arrangements had been known. Nevertheless, the horizontal Dimension 1

perfectly reflects the coalition – opposition divide. Meanwhile, Dimension 2 reflects the differences within both the coalition and opposition. Smer-SD, SNS and HZDS were clearly perceived as distant from other parties on dimension 1 – the former two separated from the latter by a membership in a different quadrant based on Dimension 2. On the other side of Dimension 1 we see that the new challenger, SaS, may have been accepted by the traditional SDKÚ-DS and KDH constituency as just another center-right party – as “the new ANO”; a party which could supply the missing votes. Conservative KDH voters and right-wing SDKÚ-DS supporters have seen SaS more as an ideological complement and perhaps perceive the anti-establishment appeals as being directed more against the nationalistic-socialist “troika” than against the liberal-conservative grouping. The acceptance of SaS by traditional center-right voters may have been based on its ideological proximity to the center-right camp. In short, the new challenger, SaS, was perceived neither negatively, nor distinctively by the voters. The challenge does not seem to have been considered bad or dangerous, but rather welcomed.

The traditional ethnic party, SMK, remained a universal pariah that was disliked by voters of both the coalition and opposition. The ethnic divide, which determined Slovak politics so much in the 1990s has, however, diminished. SMK did not manage to get into the national parliament and was in this respect replaced by its offspring, Most-Híd, which advertised itself as a multi-ethnic, Magyar-Slovak party. Unlike SMK, it was not perceived as the “Slovak regional branch” of the Hungarian ruling party FIDESZ lead by PM Viktor Orbán, which has been in power in Hungary since 2010. The MDS results suggest that voters in general perceived the newcomer positively and as close to the center-right camp.

FIGURE 2: - Location of political parties in two-dimensional space according to the MDS analysis in 2012



Source: Institute for Public Affairs, 2012.

In 2012 we relied on a pre-election poll, which was the ideal situation, because the perceptions of respondents were not influenced by parties' actual conduct in the coalition negotiations. Still Dimension 1 reflects the opposition – coalition divide and predicts the viable governing pattern. The results placed SNS and Smer-SD into the same section of the two-dimensional space clearly distant from the opposition, thus predicting their joint governing coalition had it not been for SNS's failure to pass the threshold and Smer-SD's success in obtaining a majority of seats in the parliament on their own. Dimension 2 illustrates how respondents perceived the differences within the former ruling camp – the new

opposition. SaS – KDH range most likely refers to the notable liberal – conservative divide as these parties clearly represent its opposite poles. What is more important, however, is that discarding for the increasingly irrelevant SDKÚ-DS, the opposition has been spread through two quadrants. One included KDH and Most-Híd. Another one SaS and newly formed OĽaNO.

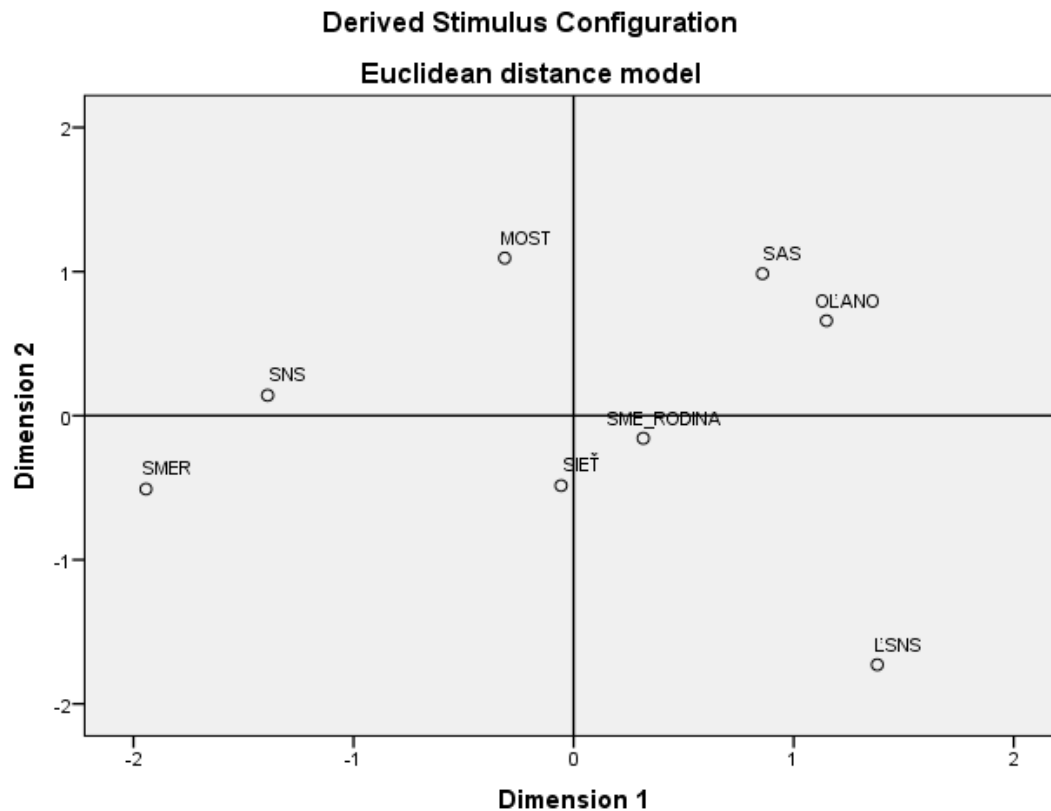
Blamed for the fall of the PM's Radičová government¹¹, SaS came to be resented by a number of the center-right voters. OĽaNO's score may have combined perceptions of the party's own anti-establishment credentials with its guilt-by-association relationship with SaS. This is because OĽaNO's parliamentary caucus was formed by a splinter group from SaS. As a corollary, SaS not become a truly anti-establishment challenger in the perceptions of voters until 2012 when it broke an important rule of *the political game* by not supporting the government of which it was a part. Instead it let the government fall in a vote of no confidence. In other words, while in 2010 SaS may have presented a challenge in terms of its appeal, its seriousness only got acknowledged only in 2012. MDS emphasized such ostracism of SaS also by showing that OĽaNO - despite of being in the same quadrant as SaS – was perceived as notably closer to the remaining opposition parties.

Finally, voter perceptions at the beginning of the term foresaw what has become reality throughout the entire term – the fact that opposition against the single-party government of Smer-SD was never really united, hardly ever acted as such, and the pattern of disunity pitching new anti-establishment opposition members (SaS and OĽaNO) against the ones originating in established parties (KDH and Most-Híd).¹²

¹¹ The centre-right coalition lead by PM Ms. Radičová lasted only less than two years (2010-2012) as it lost a vote of confidence in October 2011 because the vote on bailout (measures to bolster the powers of the Euro zone bailout fund) was tied to the vote of confidence in the government. Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), one of the four parties in the governing coalition, opposed the bailout and abstained from the vote which resulted in the lack of confidence failing.

¹² By the same token, the results also indicate that traditional coalition - opposition divide might have been already mentally broken in 2012 and a party of the center-right coalition – KDH or Most-Híd – might have been willing to cross the aisle and join Smer-SD had there been such need and opportunity. But this was rendered inconsequential by the fact that Smer-SD could create a single-party government; it was only in the aftermath of the 2016 elections that Most-Híd joined Smer-SD and the returned SNS in the ruling coalition.

FIGURE 3: - Location of political parties in two-dimensional space according to the MDS analysis in 2016



Source: CSES Slovakia, 2016.

The 2016 poll was conducted a few months after the election and therefore it is reasonable to assume that perceptions of the respondents had been “contaminated” by the parties’ conduct in coalition negotiations and early stages of governing. This is an important caveat because in many respects the coalition building in the aftermath of the 2016 elections brought about a number of unprecedented decisions and moves accompanied by heated emotions among the public as well as political class.

After KDH fell out of parliament¹³, Most-Híd and Siet’ decided to join Smer-SD and SNS in the ruling coalition.¹⁴ While most likely opportunistic in its nature, this move was

¹³ Since one of the allied parties, KDH, had failed to get the 5 per cent necessary to gain seats in parliament.

a culmination of the trend of opposition disunity and growing distance between the “traditional” and anti-establishment blocs within the opposition, which can be seen in the 2012 MDS (Figure 2). Namely, Most-Híd justified its decision to join the government by *de facto* admitting that it preferred governing with Smer rather than with the anti-establishment parties, which would have been the only alternative. The party states that the principal differences with the anti-establishment parties on the issue of political conduct was the reason. Therefore, the anti-establishment parties for the first time decisively influenced an important parameter of the party competition – a coalition-opposition pattern – by escalating the conflict with the remaining parties of the centre-right opposition.

More importantly, while it may be argued that in the 2012-2016 period, the pattern of the Slovak party politics had been crypto-tripolar with disunited opposition blocs drifting away from each other. There was also different parliamentary voting patterns with KDH and Most-Híd voting in one bloc, SaS and OĽaNO forming another bloc and the government forming a third bloc. After 2016 election this crypto-tripolar model has changed into the evidently manifested three poles of the party system. This was primarily caused by the success of the two new entrants, the anti-systemic ĽSNS and to lesser extent Sme rodina and the fact that KDH fell out of parliament while Most-Híd crossed the aisle and joined the Smer-SD and SNS in the ruling coalition.

The anti-systemic ĽSNS unequivocally established the third pole of the Slovak party system exhibiting classical ideological and relational anti-systemness when all remaining parties ostracized it and refused to cooperate with it or vote for their legislative proposals even if they may have happened to agree with them. Originally, anti-establishment Sme rodina used to be considered closer to ĽSNS than to the older anti-establishment opposition parties. It was mostly due to its professed social conservatism and “conservative statism”. But gradually, it seems to be accepted that Sme rodina joined SaS and OĽaNO in an anti-

¹⁴ Because of this decision Siet’ suffered a crippling split and its rump parliamentary caucus has been absorbed by Most-Híd.

establishment but pro-systemic opposition bloc based on the shared anti-establishment appeal in general and anti-corruption rhetoric in particular.

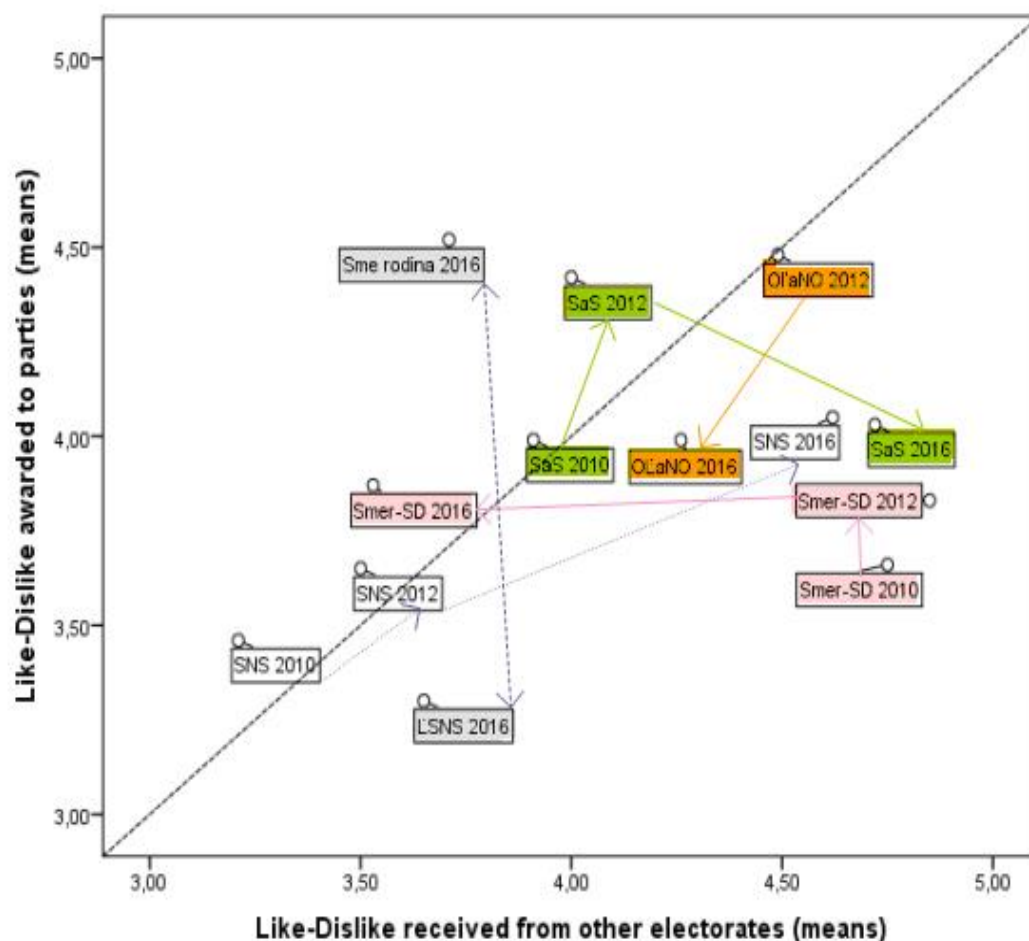
The MDS results in Figure 3 show Dimension 1 capturing the divide between the actual coalition (Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd and #Siet') and the potential opposition parties. At the same time, it signals notable difference within both camps as the positions of individual parties are scattered on remarkably larger area than before. In the case of the opposition, it reflects the principal divide between what could be called the loyal and disloyal opposition. ĽSNS occupies its own quadrant and MDS also confirmed that shortly after elections the voters perceived Smerodina as a different challenger than ĽSNS. While borderline sharing the quadrant with the former, the party is closer to the parties of the previous generation of challengers, SaS and OĽaNO, which, however, occupy the quadrant of their own.

In conclusion, the decision of the only surviving “traditional” opposition party, Most-Híd, to take the distance from their anti-establishment partners along with the emergence of the effectively anti-system party reshaped the party system and its dynamics to the extent which Slovak parties are learning to cope with.

The next figure presents some of the most interesting changes Slovak party system went through since 2010. It does it by showing how the parties' favorability traveled in two-dimensional space defined as awarded vs. received dis/likes with only few selected parties but across all three elections in question.¹⁵

¹⁵ The X axis shows favorability of parties while the Y axis “generosity” or willingness of their supporters as far as (dis)liking other parties is concerned.

FIGURE 4: Trends in Public Perception of Traditional, Anti-Establishment and Anti-System Parties, 2010-2016



Source: Sources: CSES Slovakia 2010 and 2016; IVO 2012.

In summary, the former anti-establishment challenger and current de facto traditional party Smer-SD has become much less likeable than it was in 2010 and 2012. The opposite move has been registered in case of SNS – it has become notably more likeable and therefore accepted party as well as slightly more “giving” one.

The two older anti-establishment parties, SaS and OĽaNO, retained stable positions not very far from the symmetrical line. SaS improved their likeability in 2016 while OĽaNO showed the sign of moderately losing both likeability and generosity.

The third generation's Kotleba-ĽSNS and Sme rodina are interesting cases as they are at the similar level of received dis/likes from the others; however, Sme rodina is more ready to reward other parties. Kotleba-ĽSNS's perception confirms its pariah and anti-system status. Having the highest level of identification (likes for its own party) among all the scrutinized parties it manifests quite isolationistic, inward-looking position.

CONCLUSIONS

In this text we have described three generations of the challenger parties following the 1998 resolution of the conflict over the definition of rules of the regime in Slovakia.

The first generation directly referred to the polarized conflict of 1990s and successfully tried to blame the traditional elite and their engagement in the mentioned battles as a democratic failure of sorts. These challengers presented their call for conciliatory politics as moral basis for their right to participate in the ruling of the country. Of these challengers only Smer-SD survived and merged into the mainstream by monopolizing the leftist pole of the Slovak politics.

In the second generation of challengers that appeared around the 2010 elections, we have witnessed the reaction to the apparent failure of the post-1998 political class to prevent Slovak politics from falling to the pit of the predatory, corrupt and particularistic exercise of power. The second-generation challengers stressed primarily anti-corruption and integrity in public office. Of these parties, SaS retained its anti-corruption ethos even though it has been gradually drifting into the mainstream of the Slovak politics on other accounts. OĽaNO, on the other hand, continued to exercise its anti-party, maverick anti-establishment posture while acting like a regular political party in the public office.

In the case of the third wave of challengers around 2016, we have seen an even stronger anti-establishment posture, unprecedented radicalism of doubts about democracy's fitness for Slovakia, and the rise of openly anti-systemic party to the parliament. This

changed mood brought in a new – and still different – anti-establishment party Sme rodina which has effectively joined ranks with SaS and OĽaNO in the camp of systemic opposition. But it also promoted to power the party with the radical right program and extremist background representing the ever-growing anti-systemic tendency within the public opinion.

Our analysis of the ways in which the public made sense of these developments – and expressed them in their opinions on parties in at issue – yielded following finding:

As to whether respondents perceived the new challenger parties as distinct from the traditional parties, the answer is “it depends”. In 2010, the new challenger party SaS had been perceived more as a complement to the center-right opposition, a new opposition party rather than an actor with a distinct position within the party system. In 2012, SaS was perceived as a distant party separated from “traditional” parties, including former coalition partners in the two-dimensional presentation of respondents’ sympathies. Paradoxically, this perception was not based on party appeals but most likely on the past record in government when in October 2011 SaS broke the informal rules of interactions and *de facto* failed to support their own government in the vote of confidence. Since 2012, SaS and OĽaNO have come to be perceived as distinguishable, yet not extremely, different from other opposition parties – as a separate camp in the making – which quite well reflected the reality on the ground. Both parties continue to be perceived in similar terms despite the discernible difference in the nature of their anti-establishment appeal, ideological inclinations and policy and institutional preferences. In 2016, SaS and OĽaNO retained their distinct position as the anti-establishment challengers. Respondents’ perceptions clearly distinguished them not only from the ruling parties, but also from opposition Kotleba-ĽSNS and also from Sme rodina which *de facto* concluded a political alliance with SaS and OĽaNO in the parliament. As for the third generation of challenger parties, the public indeed perceives Sme rodina and Kotleba-ĽSNS as being different – among themselves as well as in relation to the ruling coalition and the systemic opposition.

When it comes to intra-generational differences in perception, it was not that much the case in the second generation. In the third one, however, respondents very clearly indicated their very different relationship to the parties at issue.

As for the inter-generational perception (dis)similarities, the 2016 MDS suggests that general public in their perceptions tended to clearly separate the older and younger challengers. In the case of Kotleba- ĽSNS it was clearly the consequence of the obvious and expressed bilateral anti-systemic distance. In case of Sme rodina, however, the perceptions placed it more close to the senior challengers, yet still as a distinct kind. When in 2016 Sme rodina politically joined the two senior parties in the systemic opposition camp of the new tripolar arrangement, public perception failed to acknowledge it even six months after elections.

Finally, practically all respondents – including Kotleba-ĽSNS supporters – succeeded in 2016 in recognizing that ĽSNS had been an actor thoroughly distinct from all remaining political parties. This corresponds with the analysis of party's position concluding that it exhibited both ideological and relational anti-systemness (Gyárfášová 2018).

As demonstrated by the post-election development of parties' popularity it looks that the support for anti-system ĽSNS remains at least at the level of its electoral result of the 2016 elections. The surveys show that its voters identify greatly with their chosen party and would vote for that party again. Moreover, the party continues to mobilized young voters, including first-time voters. On the other hand, newly established parties closer to the center-right and center-left mainstream without anti-establishment appeals are emerging. Slovakia's party system is in a constant flux. The question is whether the development will continue by further radicalization of anti-system parties or rather by success of new moderate alternatives/challengers to the traditional mainstream.

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