

# HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

## WAR IN UKRAINE

Political Context: Slovakia



June 2023



## About The Beacon Project

The International Republican Institute strengthens citizen voices and helps make their leaders more accountable and responsive. To put it simply, IRI encourages democracy in places where it is absent, helps democracy become more effective where it is in danger and shares best practices where democracy is flourishing.

Vladimir Putin is actively trying to sway public opinion throughout Europe using hostile propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion as a way to destabilize its neighbors. Therefore, in 2015, IRI launched the Beacon Project to counteract this misinformation.

The Beacon Project does not prevent disinformation from occurring—a laudable but impossible goal. Nor does it confront every instance of disinformation—though we work with partners who do just that. IRI's focus is to dismantle the underlying conditions that allow disinformation to spread. Strengthening democracy is the best approach for nations to respond not just to today's threat, but to better endure in the face of future threats in whatever form they take.

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# Introduction

There has been a political crisis in Slovakia since the summer of 2022 resulting in the country's **first** caretaker government of non-partisan nominees coming into power in May 2023. The technocrat government led by Ľudovít Ódor, vice-governor of the National Bank of Slovakia, will rule until a new government is formed on the basis of a snap parliamentary election which will take place on September 30, 2023.

The political crisis that led to these events surrounded the government of the Prime Minister Igor Matovič, later replaced by Eduard Heger, both from the center-right Ordinary People (OĽANO) party. Their four-party coalition **took power** after the parliamentary elections at the end of February 2020. This government emerged from the hope that the country would be able to change after the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018 as well as other corruption and organized crime-related scandals surrounding the long rule of the former PM Robert Fico of the social-democratic SMER party.

However, Matovič's government, which began in the turbulent times shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, was accompanied by internal disputes mainly between the head of the center-right liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) Richard Sulík and Matovič, who resigned from the position of Prime Minister in 2021 and OĽANO's Eduard Heger took his place. SaS left the government by the end of summer 2022 which triggered **a vote of no confidence** faced by a cabinet already in the minority after the exit of SaS. Heger was entrusted with leading the government until the snap election planned for September 2023 but after multiple ministers left the government, Heger resigned in May 2023 which led to the current caretaker government of technocrats.

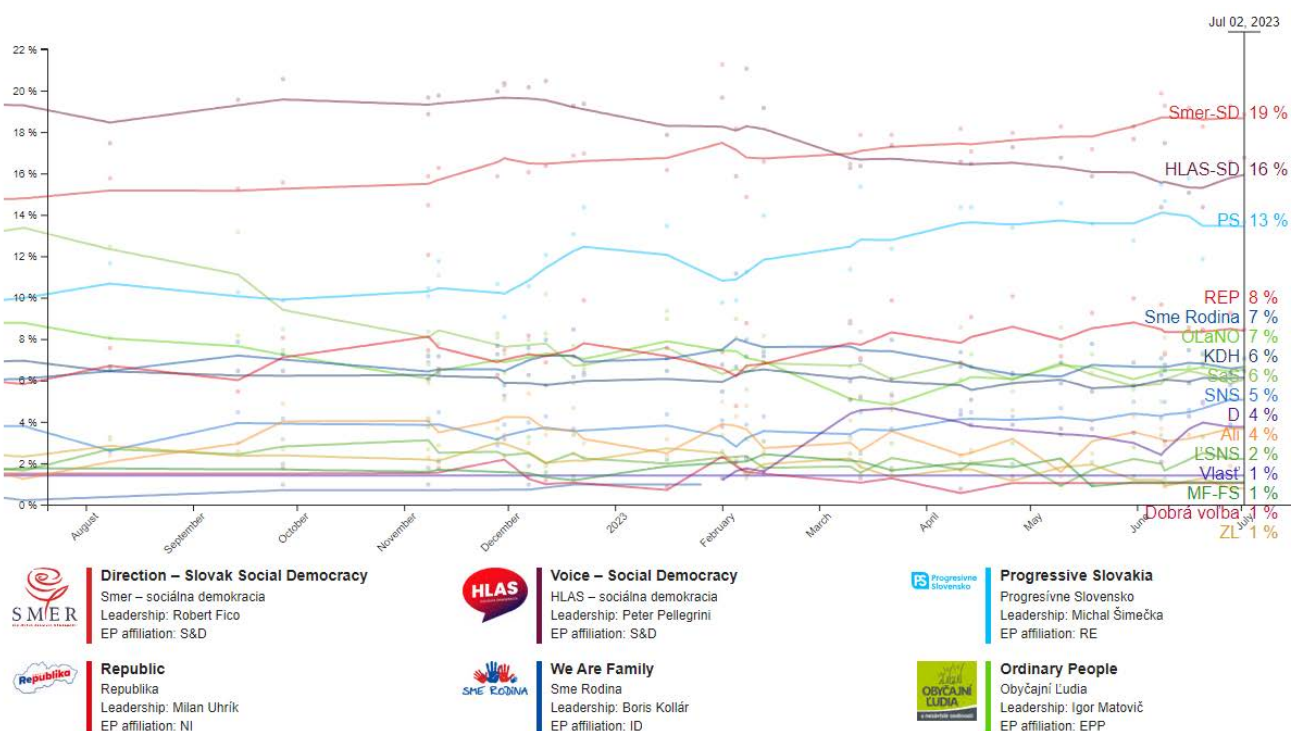


# War in Ukraine in the Political Discourse

Despite the long political crisis, Slovakia has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine since the beginning of the unprovoked Russian aggression which was immediately condemned by Slovak political representatives. The President Zuzana Čaputová and now former PM Eduard Heger have been some of the most vocal supportive voices.

In February this year, Slovakia was among the **largest** donors of aid to Ukraine. Slovakia has provided material aid worth 9.3 million euros and military aid worth 168 million euros so far. The **official narrative** is that helping Ukraine protects Slovakia and therefore the decision to help Ukraine is a pragmatic security and economic decision.

However, there are also strong voices against the support of Ukraine among the political opposition led by Robert Fico (SMER) who is also currently **leading the polls**. The far-right has also been vocally against this support, namely the Republika movement which is currently at 8% in the polls but its members tend to garner considerable outreach on social media. The Slovak political discourse about Ukraine tends to become particularly sensitive when it comes to potential military aid, as was the case in March 2022 when the Slovak National Council ratified an agreement on defense cooperation with the United States and again in March 2023 when the Slovak government **approved** the transfer of thirteen MiG-29 fighters and part of the KUB missile system to Ukraine. Hostile narratives about Ukraine supported by many political actors are also considered as one of the reasons behind the negative **Slovak views** on Ukrainian refugees, strongest among the V4 countries.



## Main Political Actors

As mentioned above, for the first time in the history of Slovakia, a caretaker government of technocrats is taking over after the collapse of the government of Eduard Heger (OĽANO), which took place on May 7. Heger's government coalition, originally led by Igor Matovič (OĽANO), consisted of four parties: Ordinary People (OĽANO) who won the parliamentary elections in 2020, We Are Family, the Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), and For the People party.<sup>1</sup>

For many months now, though, **the polls** have been dominated by the social-democratic opposition - former PM Fico's SMER as well as former PM and former SMER member Peter Pellegrini's HLAS party. Another party climbing the polls has been Progressive Slovakia which was unsuccessful in the 2020 parliamentary elections despite predictions, and the far-right Republic party also remains above the electability threshold.

Party/Party Leader	Number of Followers on Facebook	Poll of Polls Voting Intention
SMER - Social Democrats (SMER-SD)	138.000	17%
Robert Fico	211.000	
The Voice - Social Democrats (HLAS-SD)	43.000	16%
Peter Pellegrini	314.000	
Progressive Slovakia (PS)	47.000	14%
Irena Bihiarová	24.000	
Republic	14.000	8%
Milan Uhrík	162.000	
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO)	222.000	7%
Igor Matovič	272.000	
We Are Family (Sme rodina)	121.000	7%
Boris Kollár	143.000	
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	130.000	7%
Richard Sulík	141.000	

<sup>1</sup> However, For the People was gradually left by multiple members until only one MP remained.







## Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO)

The anti-establishment party founded in 2011 won the 2020 parliamentary election (25.02%) with an anti-corruption agenda. Its leader Igor Matovič has been a well-known vocal critic of Fico's reign and has pledged to clean up politics, as **reflected** in his party's slogan: *"Let's Beat the Mafia Together"*. OĽaNO is a center-right political movement, often described as populist, and after gaining power in 2020, OĽaNO adopted a generally conservative outlook. However, Matovič quickly built a reputation of an **unpredictable leader** in frequent squabbles with Richard Sulík, leader of SaS. This led to Matovič being the least trusted member of the government with only 11 percent of respondents trusting him according to **polls**.

Despite the chaotic nature of the coalition politics, OĽaNO took a firm **stance** in support of Ukraine and linked Slovakia's security to Ukraine's: *"if Ukraine loses, Slovakia loses. Tens of thousands of innocent people have already died for our freedom, let's be grateful and don't betray them."* An important part was also played by OĽaNO's Jaroslav Nad', Minister of Defence, who contributed to the supportive messaging about Ukraine especially when it came to providing military material.

When it comes to the party's presence on social media and messaging about Ukraine, Igor Matovič is followed by 272,000 people. His generally most interacted with posts<sup>2</sup> consist of personal content, but also **posts** promoting support for Ukraine. Among his most popular posts about the war are mainly **posts** supporting Ukraine in facing unprovoked aggression, bashing Russia for disrespecting the principle of sovereignty or **celebrating** Slovak aid provided to Ukraine (notably the S-300 air defense system). However, Matovič's messaging about Ukraine was not overly active during the almost 15 months of war - the CrowdTangle tool identified only 39 posts based on a keyword search related to Ukraine and Russia.

Matovič's successor as PM Eduard Heger was more active in online messaging about Ukraine with 198 posts, although his account has a smaller reach than Matovič's, with 55,000 followers. His most popular posts about Ukraine mainly included **criticism** of Fico's unsupportive and pro-Kremlin stance towards the war, **celebration** of Slovakia gifting the S-300 air defense system to Ukraine or documenting Heger's visits to Ukraine. Heger's generally most interacted with posts include a lot of Ukraine as well, led by a **photo** of him and Ukrainian president Zelensky.

The Facebook account of the OĽaNO movement, followed by 222,000 users, also has been active within the topic of Ukraine with 376 posts, although the most popular **posts** pertained to domestic politics in a wider context of the war. In its popular posts, the movement also **called out** opposition members and their manipulative discourse about the war, including Fico and Andrej Danko, leader of the fringe Slovak National Party and former Speaker of the National Council (Slovak parliament).

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During a monitoring period of 14 February 2022 - 15 May 2023.





## We Are Family (Sme rodina)

We Are Family is a populist political movement active since 2015, the second strongest coalition party in Matovič's (and later Heger's) government. Its leader, businessman Boris Kollár became the Speaker of the National Council. The movement professes conservative values in cultural and ethical issues and promotes strong anti-immigration stances. The movement is often described as soft Eurosceptic. The party **declares** its aim to “*protect families in Slovakia from threats from the outside and from the inside*”. The party's agenda includes building state rental apartments, 25,000 of which were promised by Kollár when forming the government coalition.

**According to** Boris Kollár, Slovakia wants to be there when the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine begins. He also confirmed that Slovakia supports Ukraine's entry into the EU's structures, but it must meet all criteria and go through the entire process, as Slovakia did in the past. Regarding possible Ukraine accession to NATO, Kollár **claims** that it is impossible for a country in which there is a military conflict. “*It is very irresponsible to give Ukraine unnecessary hopes, but the process can start.*”

On Facebook, We Are Family has 121,000 followers. In its general communication, the party sticks to the topics of policies supporting policies, especially families with children, and the issue of state apartments. The party does not post often about Ukraine (30 posts since the start of the war), but is generally supportive and links Ukrainian security to Slovak security. However, the messaging on Ukraine also includes emphasis on “*Slovak interests first*” and the party **criticized** cutting off Russian gas as an ineffective form of sanctions that harms Slovakia.

The party leader Boris Kollár is followed by 143,000 users on Facebook. His generally popular posts include **support** of Ukraine but also **posts** about “*disrespectful*” refugees which actually belong to Kollár's most popular posts when it comes to Ukraine specifically. Despite this topic, Kollár openly condemns Russia and promotes support of the attacked country. His messaging on Ukraine is minimal though, with 19 posts identified by the CrowdTangle tool since the beginning of the war.

## SASKA

## Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)

SaS is a Slovak economically liberal center-right party that has been active since 2009, led by economist Richard Sulík. At the European level, the party presents itself in a Eurorealist or slightly Eurosceptic manner. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the party gained only 6.2 percent but became part of the government coalition, and left in September 2022 as part of the long political crisis. Sulík was the Minister of Economy in the Matovič/Heger government and Deputy Prime Minister under Heger. SaS was already part of a government crisis in 2011 when the party disagreed with strengthening of the powers of the European Financial Stability Facility which eventually led to the government of Iveta Radičová losing a confidence vote **which led** to the second government of Robert Fico.

SaS and Sulík support Ukraine, although Sulík caused resentment in Kyiv even a month before the start of the invasion when he **called** sanctions imposed on Russia “*unfortunate*”: “*Countries are supposed to trade with each other... Sanctions only do damage and the Russians won't return Crimea anyway. You need to look ahead and build relationships*”. Otherwise, Sulík believes victory of Ukraine and subsequent peace is in the highest interest of the Slovak Republic.



SaS is followed by 130,000 people on Facebook. Its popular general communication included posts about former Minister of Foreign Affairs **Ivan Korčok**, a firmly pro-Western figure supportive of the Ukrainian cause, but also **criticism** of Fico for his stance towards Ukraine. When it comes to the party's messaging specifically on Ukraine, the most popular posts support Ukraine's fight, designate Russia a terrorist state and also **call out the opposition** for spreading hostile narratives about Ukraine (again, Fico being the prime target of criticism).

Richard Sulík is followed by 141,000 Facebook users. His general communication from the last year is dominated by **criticism** of OĽaNO and his disputes with Matovič within the long political crisis but also by celebration of **secured** energy supplies for the country as Sulík was part of the negotiations. When it comes to messaging about Ukraine and Russia, only 23 posts were identified, mostly focused on **gas supplies** and secured **energy supplies** in general, as well as reducing energy dependence of Russia. His popular posts also include the controversial **statement**: *"If it becomes necessary, we will pay for the gas in rubles."*



## SMER - Social Democrats (SMER-SD)

SMER was established in 1999 as a split from the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left. SMER soon became the dominant left-wing political party in Slovakia, occupying the position of the strongest government party from 2006 to 2010 and from 2012 to 2018. These governments were led by the party leader Robert Fico.

Although the party has distanced itself significantly from communism, it maintains a strong left-wing nationalist ideological base as an antithesis to Western social liberal progressivism. The party respects Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO but often sharply criticizes the functioning of both organizations. At the same time, the party is associated with many corruption cases in Slovakia.

There are several reasons why the SMER party ended up in the opposition after the defeat in the parliamentary elections back in 2020, but the primary **reason** was the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018, which resulted in massive demonstrations and the resignation of then PM Robert Fico. Subsequently, the police started prosecuting several people associated with Fico's time in power.

However, after the fall of the Heger government and with upcoming snap elections in September, SMER is the most popular party according to **polls**. Since SMER lost the parliamentary elections after long years of rule, Robert Fico has opted for increasingly radical rhetoric. He criticized vaccination against COVID-19 and pandemic measures and he frequently criticizes the EU, sanctions against Russia, the defense agreement between Slovakia and the US ratified in March 2022, as well as helping Ukraine.

Immediately after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, SMER **voted** for condemning the Russian aggression. But already in June 2022, Ukraine **included** Robert Fico on a list of individuals spreading Russian propaganda. Since the beginning, Fico has opposed Slovakia helping Ukraine, saying it is economically disadvantageous. He also claims that Russia responded with a war to NATO expansion. And although SMER allegedly **supports** Ukraine's entry into the EU if it fulfills the conditions, the party has a problem with Ukraine being part of NATO. **According to** Fico, Ukraine's entry would mean World War III. SMER has other members known for spreading pro-Russian propaganda, including MP Ľuboš Blaha, a **supporter** of Vladimir Putin's regime who tends to accuse Europe of Russophobia.





On Facebook, SMER has 138.000 followers, while Robert Fico is followed by 211.000 users. His posts belong to the most interacted with ones on Slovak Facebook, according to long-term **monitoring** by Slovak civil society. In **one** of his most popular posts, Fico talks about refusing “*threats*” from President Zelensky about cutting off gas and oil supplies for Slovakia. He adds “*Slovakia must not support the embargo against Russian oil and gas because it would be a self-destructive decision!*” Fico’s criticism of EU steps he finds nonsensical frequently go hand in hand with conspiratorial talk **about the US** forcing and directing EU’s decisions.

In his popular messaging, hostile narratives towards Ukraine prevail, together with criticism of the government. These often include anti-military aid narratives that **claim** the government prioritizes guns and war over its citizens and seeks praise abroad. His another frequent **narrative** is that Ukraine, often personified in Zelensky, is a threat to Slovak national interests.



## The Voice - Social Democrats (HLAS-SD)

The party is chaired by Peter Pellegrini who founded it in 2020 with a group of MPs after leaving the SMER-SD party. Pellegrini is also a former PM since he took over from Fico after the 2018 government crisis following the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak. Together with the SMER, Hlas-SD is currently leading the **polls**. The party promotes traditional social-democratic goals and has a general pro-European outlook. It professes a more conservative stance on social issues. Several members have also been **associated** with bribery and abuse of power.

**According to** the HLAS, Ukraine has the right to defend itself, but the party emphasizes two conditions of providing Slovak aid — the defense capabilities of Slovakia must not be endangered and aid must be part of a collective decision at the EU and NATO levels. HLAS also **criticizes** the attitude of the SMER towards Ukraine and has accused Fico of being double-faced, especially after Fico expressed support for Ukraine’s membership in the European Union.

HLAS and Pellegrini earned a reputation for **ambiguous stances** and opting to occupy the middle ground, which also applies to their communication about Ukraine. HLAS also condemned Russian aggression immediately after its start and is a proponent of humanitarian aid and even assisting Ukrainian refugees, but its stance towards military aid is more complicated. HLAS and Pellegrini continue to emphasize retaining Slovak defense capabilities and protecting Slovak interests should be prioritized and any military aid requires proper compensation.

HLAS has 43,000 followers on Facebook. In its general communication, the party sticks to social-democratic agenda and criticizes the government, but its popular posts also include **accusing** the government of failing to protect Slovaks from “*contaminated wheat from Ukraine*” and **questioning** the decision to give the S-300 air defense system to Ukraine. The party communication on Ukraine and Russia specifically has been minimal (13 posts) that include challenging the government **to stop** its “*politics of war adventures*”.

Peter Pellegrini has 314,000 followers on Facebook and his posts criticizing the government as incompetent and deceitful belong to the most popular posts on Slovak Facebook. Pellegrini often uses Ukraine as a **proxy topic** in his government criticism to prove his points that the government does not fulfill its promises, neglects national interests and uses Ukraine as an excuse for its incompetent governing which led to increased prices. Pellegrini’s **questioning** of gifting the S-300 systems without compensation for Slovak defense arsenal also made it to his most popular posts.



# Main Challenges

Slovakia is to face a difficult snap election at the end of September. The country faces record levels of citizens' **dissatisfaction** with how the country is developing, over 80 percent of Slovaks are convinced the country is going in the wrong direction. According to most respondents, the former governments of Matovič and Heger, in which the Slovak people had placed high hopes, failed at handling all the key crises they faced (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the energy crisis). This perceived failure led to the return of popularity of Robert Fico, despite his governing being associated with corruption and the murder of Ján Kuciak. Fico's SMER is leading the election **polls** along with Pellegrini's HLAS, as well as **polls** about the most trusted politicians after President Čaputová.

The question remains whether Fico would be able to form a coalition in case he wins. Fico's former coalition partner Andrej Danko leads the far-right Slovak National Party just below the electability threshold of five percent. However, he has become closer with the far-right Republic movement which currently polls at eight percent), not only in terms of increasingly radical **rhetoric** about EU sanctions, the government and president being servants of the US and warmongers, or Ukraine being the most corrupt country. If these parties were to form a government, it would mean a significant turn of Slovakia and its foreign policy away from the West. This, of course, would impact the support for Ukraine and Slovakia's relations with Western allies.

Several polls have also predicted a victory for Pellegrini's HLAS. However, Pellegrini's ambiguous rhetoric also applies to coalition preferences as he **has not clearly** ruled out SMER, although he ruled out a seat for Fico. There are **indications** that HLAS would seek different partners, such as SaS, Progressive Slovakia and the Christian Democratic Movement, also pro-European. This scenario paints a more optimistic picture about the future of Slovakia's pro-Western orientation and support for Ukraine.

The third most popular party in the polls is Progressive Slovakia (PS), a social-liberal extra-parliamentary political movement, formerly vice-chaired by current President Čaputová. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the party was considered a major competitor of SMER's government but did not make it to the parliament despite a stable position polling above 10%.



# Forecast

Results of the snap election will also determine the development of Slovak support of Ukraine. When it comes to the population's sentiments about Ukraine, fears caused by economic hardship and geographical proximity to the war show through. Seventy percent of citizens **do not agree** with the supply of weapons to Ukraine, and there is not a particularly welcoming attitude towards refugees from Ukraine either. More than 60% of Slovaks think that, in a long term perspective, their presence will not be beneficial for Slovakia and **70% feel** that Slovakia does more for the refugees than for its own citizens. Over half of the Slovak population is convinced that the country should help refugees from Ukraine less than before, and they also disagree that Ukrainians should have the opportunity to stay in Slovakia after the end of the war.

According to latest **polls**, if nothing changes between now and the snap election, we will see the victory of parties undermining the support of Ukraine, such as Fico's SMER. Fico has spoken multiple times against sanctions on Russia and **proclaimed** *"if SMER-SD makes it into the government, I will not allow another single bullet to be exported to Ukraine."* SMER is also prone to collaborate with far-right parties like the Republic which is currently polling at eight percent and whose members belong to political superspreaders of hostile narratives about Ukraine.

Such an outcome of the snap election **would likely** mean a reevaluation of Slovakia's current support for Ukraine. It could complicate coordination of aid for Ukraine on the EU level. Already, the Slovak population is among the least supportive towards the EU's sanctions against Russia, and financial, military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine – only 47% support the EU's steps, compared to the EU average of 73% (the only country with a lower support is Greece with 46%). If Fico holds up to his **declarations**, Slovakia would focus on humanitarian aid *"where it is needed"* and particularly military aid would fall. Whether Fico would actually complicate EU's response significantly is questionable, especially after his proclamations that he **supports** Ukraine's entry into EU, which surprised many. When it comes to Ukraine's potential membership in NATO, Fico's messaging is clear: it would mean World War III.

The victory of HLAS and a partnership with liberal parties such as SaS and Progressive Slovakia seems like the best realistic scenario for continued support of Ukraine, although Pellegrini's ambiguous communication that includes Ukraine might further impact the population's frustration, should it not change. But in general, HLAS's messaging remains supportive.

HLAS is for Ukraine's **membership** in the EU *"if it meets all the conditions"* but is against its entry into NATO. Providing military aid remains a sensitive topic even for HLAS, case in point being the government's approval of a transfer of thirteen MiG-29 fighters and part of the KUB missile system to Ukraine. HLAS **belongs** to the parties who undermined this decision and questioned the government's authority to do such transfers, although confirming that Ukraine has the right to defend itself.

All in all, Slovakia's future stance towards Ukraine will depend on the final shape of the new government coalition after September, as will the direction of its foreign policy and internal issues such as the crackdown on corruption. The most intense campaigning and its integration of the questions ensuing from the war in Ukraine is yet to come.





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