Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2022, Volume 10, Issue 4, Pages 95–107
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5538

Article

In the Name of the Conservative People: Slovakia's Gendered Illiberal Transformation

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Submitted: 15 March 2022 | Accepted: 11 August 2022 | Published: 31 October 2022

Abstract
Over the past decade, Slovakia has witnessed the dismantling of public human rights institutions and gender equality policies and incessant efforts to limit sexual and reproductive rights. While these processes have been mostly discussed in relation to the transnational anti-gender movement, this article conceptualizes them as part of an illiberal turn. We argue that recent rhetorical, institutional, and policy processes in Slovakia have been enabled by a discursive shift positing a new subject: conservative people and their rightful demands. Our argument is bolstered through two analyses. Quantitative content analysis of media articles published between 2002 and 2020, firstly, traces the increased emphasis on the signifiers "conservative" and "liberal." This examination demonstrates that the anti-gender discourse in the 2010s accelerated and normalized this specific discursive frame. Furthermore, it underscores how the carriers of the conservative label shifted away from institutions towards individual politicians and, more importantly, toward a collective subject—people. Qualitative discourse analysis, secondly, focuses on the anti-gender discourse, understood here as a Laclauian populist practice. It posits three types of demands entangled in an equivalential chain—demands dealing with cultural recognition, material redistribution, and political representation. This analytical approach enables us to show how the construction of the conservative/liberal divide goes beyond the struggles for so-called traditional values, but is embedded in broader socioeconomic processes, and how it led to calls for political representation of the "conservative people" and for a "conservative" (in fact illiberal) transformation of political institutions.

Keywords
anti-gender politics; gender; illiberalism; populism; Slovakia

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Gender and Illiberalism in Post-Communist Europe" edited by Matthijs Bogaards (Central European University) and Andrea Pető (Central European University).

1. Introduction

In recent years, political and civil society actors in Slovakia started to assert demands on behalf of "the conservative people." In 2020, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family halted state funds aimed at promoting gender equality and created new funding programs to support the "functionality of the family." At the same time, the new director of the Institute for Work and Family Research, the public institution run under the Ministry of Labour, announced changes in the structure and agenda of the organisation. These decisions were legitimized by the need to represent the interests and voice of "the conservative majority" of Slovakia.

The measures were preceded by numerous broader processes—a constitutional amendment established the legal protection of heteronormative marriage (2014), nearly a million people voted against the rights of LGBTI people in the so-called "referendum on family" (2015), and family mainstreaming was legally introduced and required every bill to assess its potential impact on marriage, parenthood, and family (2018). The parliament also rejected the Istanbul Convention (2019–2020) and attempted to introduce more than

20 anti-abortion bills between 2018 and 2021, and the Ministry of Labour has sought to erase the term gender from all policies and insisted on using "men and women" instead (2020–2021). Though these measures have been discussed within the context of anti-gender movements (Sekerák, 2020; Valkovičová, 2017; Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019), we further suggest viewing them as contributing to an illiberal transformation (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). Moreover, we suggest that these visible and sometimes even spectacular events have been accompanied, preceded, and enabled by less obvious discursive shifts. It is in the examination of these subtle discursive processes where we see the contribution of this study to the scholarship on illiberalism and gender.

This article reveals how anti-gender actors in Slovakia created an "illiberal offer" as "an alternative, gendered worldview based on the unquestionable pitfalls of the liberal world order" (Pető, 2021, p. 317). We argue that by addressing these pitfalls and creating new *common sense* (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018), a new collective subject "the conservative people" was constructed.

Methodologically, mixed-method research was conducted to shed light on the subject. Quantitative content analysis of media articles published between 2002 and 2020 contributes to outlining *what* and/or *who* was considered conservative over time; discourse analysis of TV and radio debates broadcasted between 2014 and 2020, meanwhile, elucidates how anti-gender actors devised cultural, social, and political demands (the illiberal offer) and constructed "the conservative people" which they aimed to represent.

2. Intersection of Illiberalism, Anti-Genderism, and Populism

2.1. Scholarship on Illiberalism and Anti-Gender Movements

The current wave of illiberalism and right-wing authoritarianism can be theorized as one of the modern variants of the ideological rejection of the project of enlightenment liberalism which supposedly threatens communal bonds and the social fabric of society (Holmes, 1993). Krastev and Holmes (2018) have recently argued that the Eastern European rejection of liberalism is tied to the region's perceived humiliation from being asked to "catch up" to the liberal democratic West and from the "demographic collapse" faced by most Central and Eastern European countries, threatening their national cohesion and survival.

While illiberalism can be seen as merely a set of disruptive practices that threaten the institutional norms and procedures of liberal democracies—an aspect which often receives the label of democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018)—there is an ideological element to illiberalism which emerges from its politics of exclusion that demarks a hierarchy of who should and who should not be seen as a fully equal member of society (Kauth & King, 2020). However, the growing literature on illiberalism rarely examines the gendered dimension of this trend (cf. Kaul, 2021; Mancini & Palazzo, 2021; Pető, 2021).

At the same time, there has been growing recognition of the worldwide phenomenon of anti-gender mobilization in connection with policies involving the rights of LGBTI persons, reproductive health, sexuality education, and gender equality policies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018). The resistance to these policies is articulated as against the rhetoric of "gender ideology" (or gender theory, gender agenda, genderism).

Feminist scholarship on this anti-genderism has noted that the growing political salience of "gender ideology" is part of an illiberal transformation (Pető, 2021) currently underway. Sometimes it is posited as a *backlash* of social and transnational counter-movements (Corredor, 2019; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021) fostered by a sense of democratic deficit (Rawłuszko, 2021). Sometimes as an *ideological* construction of populist illiberalism where everything "gender" is presented as a "colonial imposition" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Or as an *empty signifier* (Mayer & Sauer, 2017), the "symbolic glue" (Kováts & Põim, 2015) that both conceals and provides an opportunity to politicize the socio-economic demands against the "neoliberal consensus" (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Kováts, 2018).

In our contribution, we treat illiberalism as a transnational "thin-ideology" project (Pető, 2021) exhibiting various local manifestations. We argue that, feeding on locally experienced failures of global neoliberal policies, illiberal transformation is fostered through the populist practice of anti-gender politics and its discursive construction of conservative people and their political demands.

Illiberal political practices in Slovakia have been mostly discussed in relation to the 1990s governments led by Vladimír Mečiar and partially to the selected practices of the governments led by Robert Fico (2006–2010 and 2012–2018) (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Havlík, 2019). Despite presenting a social democratic facade, Fico followed Mečiar's example in formulating a nationalist alliance. In fact, he never abandoned neoliberal principles nor implemented substantive improvements to the welfare state or the culture of tolerance. When his government "failed to relieve economic discontent, it has channelled this discontent into personalized hatred and fear" (Feinberg, 2022, p. 159).

In 2018, the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé, archaeologist Martina Kušnírová, sparked mass demonstrations, exposed extensive corruption, and spotlighted connections between the worlds of politics, business, and organized crime. Robert Fico stepped down as prime minister and the public optimistically anticipated the 2020 parliamentary election as an opportunity for some hope of change. Just like in Poland and Hungary before their illiberal conservative governments came to power, issues of corruption

and "clean politics" dominated the election campaign. Most of the potential parliamentary parties premised their political agendas on either directly opposing gender equality policies or promoting "traditional" values.

The 2020 election witnessed the only major progressive party, Progressive Slovakia, fail to enter parliament. The two governments to emerge successively within this parliament led by Igor Matovič (2021–2021) and Eduard Heger (2021–) are likely "Slovakia's most culturally conservative since the second world war" (Feinberg, 2022, p. 152). The coalition's largest member encompasses a party called Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (*OĽANO*)—it ran on an ardent anti-corruption campaign though its doctrinally Christian and even fundamentalist politics went by generally unnoticed. The coalition also includes We are Family (*Sme rodina*), an anti-gender and xenophobic party with a social agenda; Freedom and Solidarity (*Sloboda a solidarita*), economically neoliberal and culturally the only liberal party in government (they left the government in September 2022); and For the People (*Za ľudí*), a small conservative party that has struggled for its survival ever since. While these two governments have not necessarily been directly linked to the illiberal transformation underway in the Visegrad countries and beyond, we argue that if we conceptualize illiberalism as a gendered process, it is apparent that subtle movements towards illiberalism are ongoing and have been transpiring in Slovakia for years.

2.2. The Analytical Approach

The article uses two analytical tools: the concept of populism as developed by Ernesto Laclau (2005, 2014) and Chantal Mouffe (2018) and the idea of three-dimensional justice by Nancy Fraser (2013). Populism is understood here as a discursive practice where three elements can be identified: the creation of chain of equivalences, the drawing of a dividing line in society, and the construction of a popular subject.

In the first element, a series of equivalential chains of demands is created where one demand indicates the other. These demands are not necessarily connected in any material way, but they are linked through discursive practice (Laclau, 2005). In the analytical part, we will show how individual (unfulfilled) demands are consolidated through a floating signifier such as *protection of family* or *protection of life*. These signifiers thereby represent all demands of the chain. By creating these chains of equivalences, a dividing line is drawn in society between those responsible for the unsatisfied demands, those in power, and the "underdogs" articulating their demands. This internal frontier constructs a society as ostensibly split into two antagonistic parts (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). This second element of populism illuminates the process by which conservative/liberal became a key dividing line in Slovak politics and society. Finally, we illustrate the ways through which constant discursive practices ensured that an intrinsically diverse subject acts as a unified popular subject—conservative people in our case (Laclau, 2005, 2014; Mouffe, 2018).

Populist practice can be successful only when it resonates with people's experiences, grievances, feelings, and concerns. For this reason, we repurpose the idea of three-dimensional justice from Fraser (2013) to point to the variety of contexts in which the articulated demands can be rooted. We use Fraser's conception to structure the equivalential chains of demands constructed in the anti-gender discursive practice as those related to cultural recognition, material distribution, and political representation.

2.3. Methodological Considerations

The article combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to map the shifting meanings of the term "conservative" in the Slovak media. We follow what Creswell (2015) called explanatory sequential design where qualitative data is employed to explain quantitative findings in greater depth.

This research, consequently, focused first on conducting a quantitative content analysis of Slovak media. Due to data availability, the time scope of the study began in 2002 and covered every year that a parliamentary election took place (2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020). To capture the development of the entire media landscape, all national and regional media outlets (print, radio, TV, online; excluding social media) as available through a media monitoring service (Newton Media) were included in the study sample. The data, consequently, reflects both changes in the media market, including the emergence/disappearance of media outlets, and media production, i.e., the actual content produced over time. From this data, we selected media items that contained both terms, "conservative" and "liberal,'' and that were further connected to Slovak society and politics. Outputs covering foreign political events were excluded. Based on these criteria, a sample consisting of 3,947 media outputs was assembled. The year-over-year percentage increase/decrease across all media items was subsequently compared with the year-over-year percentage increase/decrease in media items containing the terms "conservative" and "liberal." We find that the growth of the media market (increase in the media items produced) can account for only a fraction of the increased proliferation of "conservative" and "liberal" terms over time (Figure 2).

Second, we examined who or what is considered conservative in the analysed materials. Using the MAXQDA software, we deployed inductive coding for all the "conservative" terms in the sample. While the unit of analysis constituted one year, the unit of coding consisted of one media output which could be attributed to one or more codes (altogether we worked with 52 codes). Five codes proved to be relevant for this analysis: political institutions (political parties, parliament, government,

platforms within or across parties), politicians, voters, people (e.g., judges, doctors, youth, Slovaks, people in general), and values. Figure 3 outlines the development of the connections of the term "conservative" over time.

Discourse analysis, finally, was conducted and aimed at providing a more in-depth understanding of these developments. The quantitative content analysis suggests that anti-gender politics amplified the use of "conservative" and "liberal" and contributed to the discursive shifts in meanings. Our analysis, therefore, focused on those years when the anti-gender discourse was strongest (2014–2020) and also towards selected interviews and radio/TV discussions from the above-mentioned sample (media outputs containing both terms "conservative" and "liberal") featuring anti-gender actors (politicians, representatives of civil society organisations, and the church). The aim was to include those media outputs where anti-gender actors were provided more space and could sufficiently elaborate on their reasoning. Altogether 47 media items were selected for the discourse analysis. Using this material, we conducted discourse analysis and in accordance with Laclau (2005, 2014) and Mouffe (2018) focused on three discursive aspects of populist practice: We first identified all demands articulated by the anti-gender actors and examined the relationship between them and between the demands and the external socio-political context. This initial engagement was followed by inquiry into the ways divisions of society were presented in the anti-gender discourse; how the dividing lines were drawn and between whom. This research, finally, turned to scrutinizing how the collective subject of the people is constructed and how it is attributed the term conservative.

3. Who or What Is Conservative? Quantitative Analysis of Media 2002–2020

There are two relevant findings of the quantitative content analysis: The first concerns the intensification of the occurrence of the terms "conservative" and "liberal" over time. The most significant increase can be observed after 2015 as the anti-gender discourse gained saliency (Figures 1 and 2). The second finding pertains to a shift in subjects considered conservative. While in the early 2000s, the media primarily talked about conservative political institutions, by 2020 the emphasis had shifted mostly to people who were deemed conservative (Figure 3).

In 2002, media outlets published 139 outputs containing both "conservative" and "liberal" as terms—this figure slowly increased in subsequent election years. The previous parliamentary election in 1998 had produced a broad coalition of right-wing, left-wing, conservative, and liberal political parties that stood against the authoritarian government of Vladimír Mečiar. Political parties put aside their ideological differences in the name of the common good which was understood as keeping Mečiar out of government (Tóthová & Drozda, 1999). The parliamentary elections in 2002 brought to power a centre-right, conservative-liberal government which initiated further substantial economic reforms. As summarized by Gyárfášová, "many people automatically shifted their opinions as far from a socialist standpoint as possible. As a result, the reforms were all based on neo-liberal ideas and supply-side economics" (2004, p. 2).

This new generation of politicians introduced substantive economic changes and as intellectuals, scholars,

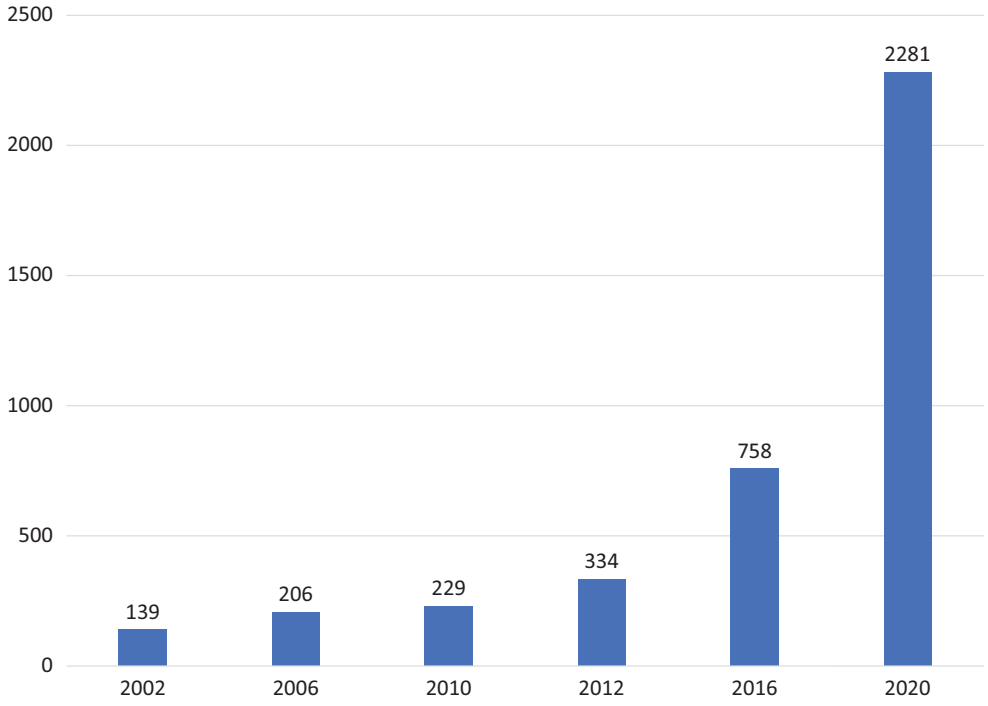

Figure 1. Media outputs containing both terms "conservative" and "liberal".

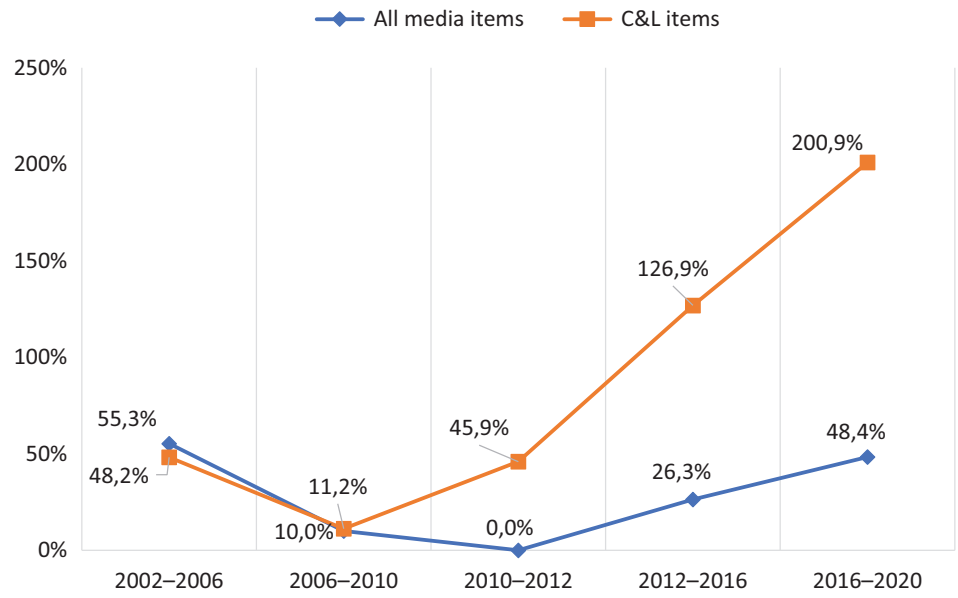

Figure 2. Year-over-year percentage increase/decrease in all media items produced and the increase/decrease in media items that contain the terms "conservative" and "liberal".

members of think tanks and civil society organisations, or media contributors, they also influenced the public and academic discourse and crafted a neoliberal consensus (Gyárfášová, 2004; Kusá, 2008). Supported by international organisations during the European Union (EU) accession process (Fabo, 2015; Kusá, 2008) and embedded within the economic transformation of other post-communist countries (Appel & Orenstein, 2016), the economic reforms were considered painful but unavoidable. As part of the neoliberal consensus, leftist politics was understood as the successor to communism and rejected (Slačálek, 2022). The left/right axis in politics was considered increasingly irrelevant and the conservative/liberal structuring of politics became more salient (Svatuška, 2004, p. 8). Political opposition also contributed to this process. The centre-left party Smer initially presented their politics of the "third way" in 2002, signalling their belonging to "modern European parties" and their overcoming of traditional ideologies of left and right. Smer subsequently united six left-wing parties and became the main representative of moderate redistributive sentiments as it sought to rebrand itself as a social democratic party (Malová, 2017, p. 6).

The conservative-liberal alliance of the Mikuláš Dzurinda cabinets (1998–2006) slowly "dissolved" in the years after EU accession. Conservative elites began searching for a new programme and "turned to morality politics…justifying a claim to represent the 'Christian voice' in politics in continuity with the Catholic dissidents' pre-1989 pro-life positions" (Vargovčíková, 2021, p. 212). While the two Dzurinda governments also introduced liberal democratic principles as part of the EU admission criteria, these have remained tenuous ever since.

A notable change in the use of terms "conservative" and "liberal" is evident between 2012 and 2020 both in terms of the quantity and the content of media outputs. While 334 media outputs talked about conservative and liberal subjects in 2012, the figure had grown to 758 media items in 2016 and 2,281 media outputs in 2020 (Figure 1). The increase reflects changes in the media market: New media outlets emerged and more content was produced, especially online. This media expansion, however, can only explain a small portion of the increase in the number of media items engaging with "conservative" and "liberal" subjects. As demonstrated by Figure 2, the number of all media items produced between 2012 and 2016 increased by 26.3 percentage points even as the number of media items mentioning "conservative" and "liberal" increased by 126.6 percentage points over the same period. This gap has only grown larger in recent years: The number of media items that talk about "conservative" and "liberal" increased by 200.9 percentage points between 2016 and 2020, yet the number of all media items grew by 48.4 percentage points. This finding suggests that much of the increase can be attributed to more frequent use of the terms "conservative" and "liberal." The share of outputs talking about "conservative" and "liberal" out of all media items produced in the respective year increased from 0.006% in 2002 to 0.03% in 2020. Finally, it should be emphasized that the steep rise is observable across the most widely consumed media outlets.

An analysis of relevant materials reveal that anti-gender actors played a crucial role in these changing patterns. In 2016, three political parties entered parliament using anti-gender rhetoric in their election campaigns. One of them (the Slovak National Party) became a part of a coalition government in 2016 and another one (We are Family) in 2020. The third party was Marian Kotleba's fascist People's Party Our Slovakia. All of them

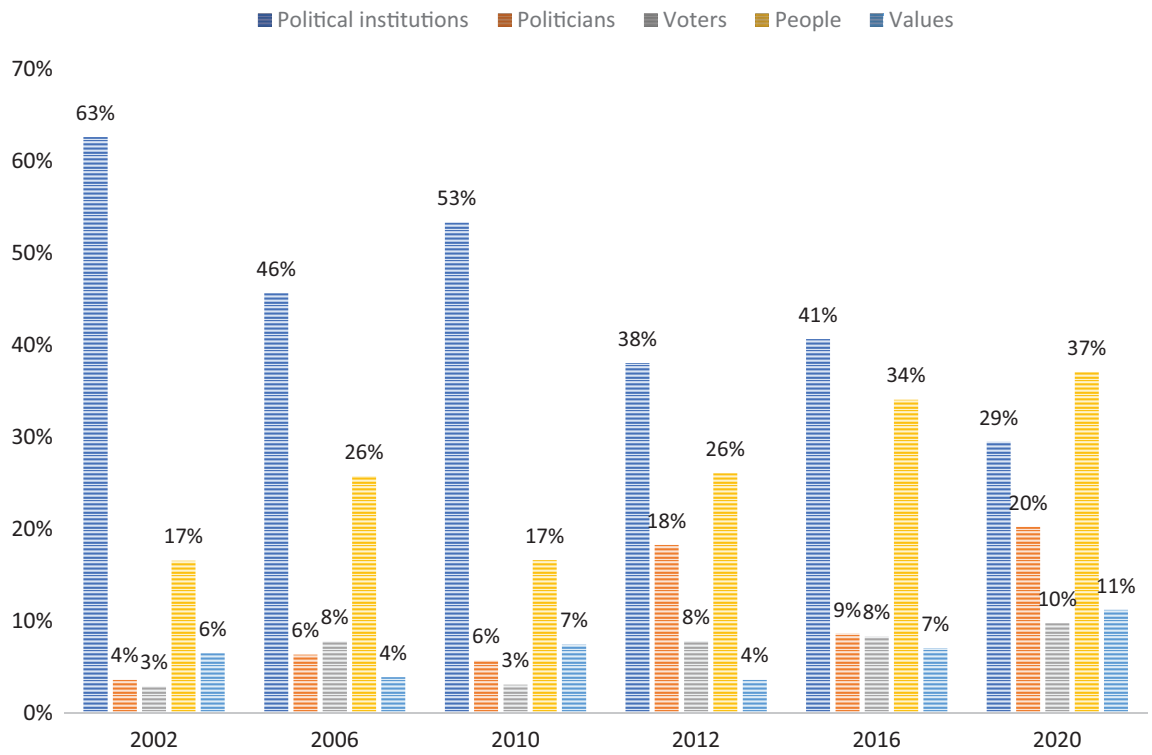

Figure 3. What/Who is conservative? Media outputs with analysed terms (as percentage of all outputs containing terms "conservative" and "liberal" in the respective year).

claimed to represent the good conservative people of Slovakia. And they were not the only actors going after this segment of the electorate—in 2020 conservative votes were also sought by Andrej Kiska's For the People party, the Christian Democratic Movement, and Igor Matovič's Ordinary People movement.

At the beginning of the analysed period, the media mostly discussed conservative actors at the institutional level including political parties, political platforms, and governments. A total of 63% of outputs published in 2002 mentioned conservative political institutions while 17% referred to conservative people and 4% discussed individual politicians. In the later periods (e.g., during the referendum against non-heteronormative families, the attacks on the Istanbul Convention, or the presentation of the anti-abortion draft bills), the analysed media sources attributed the label "conservative" to people—individuals or groups of citizens outside of political structures. The share of articles mentioning human carriers of conservativism increased over time and political institutions have become less relevant in this regard. In 2020, 37% of published media outputs mentioned conservative people, 20% addressed individual politicians, and less than 30% talked about conservative political institutions.

Over time, the signifiers "conservative" and "liberal" gained relevance against the backdrop of local coverage of politics and society in the Slovak media. The 2019 presidential election and the 2020 parliamentary election featured polls about conservative and liberal values and the predominant categorization of parties was based on the conservative/liberal divide. Media discussions focused on the fight for the "conservative voter" deemed pivotal to deciding the election, the one who matters. The discursive shift, moreover, indicates that while the term "conservative" was used to describe institutional politics in the early 2000s, it travelled through society and became an attribute of individuals and the people. The meaning of the word "conservative" was also fluid over the study period—e.g., it has been used in reference to conservative ideology, right-wing politics in general, various assumed traditions, as a counterpart to liberalism, and as an indication of backwardness. The more it was tied to individual people, the more it served as a label for those espousing certain values. One of the shifts observed concerns the terms "conservative" and "Christian" becoming nearly synonymous in the public discourse and their nearly interchangeable use by both politicians and journalists.

4. Cultural, Social, and Political Demands of the "Conservative" People. Discourse Analysis 2014–2020

The anti-gender discourse was initially propagated by church representatives and conspiracy media. This language, however, was gradually adopted by anti-establishment politicians, civic actors promoting heteronormative families, conservative party politicians, the mainstream media, and progressive civic actors, scholars, and activists (Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019). Backed

by a changing set of diverse actors, the anti-gender discourse appears to have served as a catalyst in the shift from "conservative political institutions" to "conservative people." To understand this process, we approach the anti-gender discourse as a populist practice and focus on its three elements: creating the chain of equivalences of demands, constructing a dividing line in society, and establishing a new popular subject (Laclau, 2005).

4.1. Material Security, Cultural Recognition, and Political Representation: The Equivalential Chain of Demands

The research of the anti-gender discourse has mostly focused on those aspects and demands that relate directly to feminist, LGBTI movements, or gender equality policies including opposition to same sex marriage, the concept of gender stereotypes, and abortion. The social and economic dimensions of the anti-gender movement, nevertheless, have also been stressed. The movement has particularly garnered political and societal support alongside its critique of the effects of global neoliberalism (Fodor, 2022; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Kováts, 2018; Pető, 2021). Graff and Korolczuk argue that "the coherence of this worldview relies on three persistent equivalences linking the cultural with the economic and the political" (2022, p. 164). Following up on this line of argumentation and with the intention to understand how this link between the cultural, the economic, and the political is made, we map the demands of anti-gender actors, particularly those articulated under the umbrellas of "the protection of family" and "the protection of life."

The demand to protect families is common to international anti-gender movements and is considered one of its strongest political and mobilising strategies (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In Slovakia, this demand was particularly mobilized during the 2014 constitutional amendment debates that saw heterosexual marriage gain protected status by constitutional law and the 2015 referendum campaign against marriage equality and civil unions of LGBTI people (Valkovičová, 2017). The protection of family narrative was also promulgated as an argument against the Istanbul Convention, sexual education, and access to safe and legal abortion services. While the most discussed demand of these groups calls for marriage to be recognized as a unique union between one man and one woman, discourse analysis of TV and radio debates reveals that other demands consolidated in the chain of equivalences under the umbrella of the "protection of the family." The outlined list of demands (Table 1) can be structured according to three dimensions of justice formulated by Fraser (2013)—cultural recognition, material distribution, and political representation.

The cultural recognition demands are mostly directed at promoting heterosexual couples and so-called traditional families. The traditional family is presented, in the analysed materials, as a place of social reproduction that deserves protection and a special status in society. The rejection of civil unions, non-heterosexual marriages, and adoption of children by non-heterosexual couples, so the argument goes, will ensure that the heterosexual family will not be replaced by "social experiments" and that society, the Slovak nation, and European civilization will live on (Filek, 2014). The actors, continuing this line of reasoning, also stress the need to acknowledge the rights of children and parents who are currently threatened by "evil foreign forces" which desire to detrimentally influence the education and upbringing of Slovak children. This argumentation—especially used against sexual education and the Istanbul

Table 1. The equivalential chain of demands—protection of family.

Protection of family		
Cultural recognition	Material distribution	Political representation
Marriage only between one man and one woman	Support of social reproduction and improving quality of life	Transparency and clarity
Increase birth rates, solution to the demographic crisis		Freedom and autonomy
Protection of children and children's rights	Strong family policies including economic support for families with children and for the elderly	Political voice and representation
Parents' rights to make decisions about children's education	Adequate housing	
Protection of the current structures of society and protection of the "civilization''	Debt relief	
Protection of human rights for all vulnerable populations (including conditional support for LGBTQI people)	Tax relief for families with three and more children	
Regulated migration		

Convention—is not new and has been documented elsewhere (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Some of these demands were formulated by the influential German anti-gender intellectual, Gabriele Kuby, and have already been integrated into the political platforms of far-right parties (e.g., Alternative for Germany or UKIP) or even implemented in national policies (e.g., in Poland or Hungary; Payne, 2019).

A few anti-gender actors accede to limited recognition for LGBTI people. This recognition, however, is conditioned on their invisibility in public and silence in politics (Ocilková in TA3, 2015b). There is also the promise of material and legal support—while same-sex marriage or civil unions are unacceptable in the anti-gender discourse, an alternative is offered in the form of partial legal amendments that would deal with the selected issues of same-sex partners, for instance, in the areas of health care or inheritance (Paška in TA3, 2014). Regardless of the political party or officials in power, nonetheless, these promises have never been fulfilled and such legislation has never been proposed or supported by anti-gender actors in practice. Patrick Wielowiejski (2020, p. 137) identified a similar discourse in the Alternative for Germany party and called it heteronormative rather than homophobic. In this line of argument, homosexuals are acceptable "as long as they do not demand equality."

Demands for cultural recognition are often accompanied and supported by demands for material distribution. Arguing that Slovakia lacks sufficient population growth or pro-family policies (TA3, 2015a), the actors demand a stronger family policy plank including changes in taxes and economic support for families with children and the elderly:

> Instead of working on the population policy, asking ourselves why we—and the whole Western Europe—are dying out, why there are incomplete families and single mothers and fathers, and why they have problems, we are dealing with other issues. I also do not like what we are doing right now when we could have been building housing and supporting young families. (Baránek in TA3, 2015b)

These arguments were used during the 2015 referendum against non-heterosexual families where none of the questions dealt with socio-economic issues. Anti-gender actors referred to the situation where nearly every fifth person in Slovakia lived at risk of poverty and social exclusion, the lack of rental housing, and the strong push for property ownership with prices rising constantly (Liptáková, 2017). They promised to deal with these issues if the referendum succeeded and some part of their agenda was adopted by the political parties that entered parliament in 2016 using the anti-gender rhetoric, namely the Slovak National Party and We are Family (Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019). The assumed conflict between redistribution and recognition became obvious when the anti-gender representative of the Slovak National Party mentioned the situation of the working poor and their high indebtedness and pointed to Hungary and Poland as examples of appropriate social and family policies. The leader of the party Freedom and Solidarity—the only party in parliament supporting the rights of the LGBTI people—responded that:

> This is the malaise of all political parties today—more redistribution, giving away….We say that it is not good when the state gets bigger and bigger and bigger and when it organises people's lives more and more. We say, let us do it the other way. Let's give people freedom, let's allow them to better create values. (TA3, 2016)

Though Freedom and Solidarity cannot be characterized as progressive, it was previously the only major party that vocally supported the rights of LGBTI people in high politics. Simultaneously, it pursued strict individualist and business-oriented policies and its leader joined the right-wing discourse against migration and the EU (Vargovčíková, 2021, p. 216). Other actors that publicly advocated in favour of the rights of LGBTI people included members of civil society, the media, and academia. These actors primarily spotlighted human rights and "non-negotiable principles and values"—they pursued what Eszter Kováts (2018) called the human rights consensus. The agenda pursuing the recognition of "traditional families" was actively connected with social and economic issues. The quote above, meanwhile, illustrates how the LGBTI recognition was rather vocally supported either by political actors pursuing neoliberal and austerity policies or by those who often refrained from engaging in discussions about economic issues.

When in power, anti-gender actors have sought to address some of the above-mentioned social and economic issues (e.g., social housing and financial support for families with children). Their policies, however, are often exclusionary. Proposed material support for "Slovak families," for example, has rather been utilised as a backchannel to increase birth rates—its connection with ethno-nationalism can further be traced at two levels. The introduction of family policy benefits, for one, has been typically directed at/confined to the employed segment of the population. The dispute over support for families with many children illuminated the fact that Roma people—often marginalised and at risk of long-term unemployment and/or employment through short-time contracts or uncontracted work (Kahanec et al., 2020)—were not to be generally included. The "good life" for families—their wellbeing—was additionally supposed to be secured through the rejection of migration imposed on the country by the EU and the West. These actors purported that this introduction of migration posed a danger to the Slovak social system and to Christian and European "civilization" (Hanus, 2014). As presented in the analysed materials and later

introduced at the policy level, social support was aimed at "deserving" groups of citizens (i.e., ethnically Slovak and contributing to the state through their participation in the labour market and the raising of children in their families). There are indeed notable parallels between the Hungarian "carefare regime" (Fodor, 2022) established by the government of Viktor Orbán and the policies introduced by Milan Krajniak, the Slovak Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and a nominee of the We are Family political party that climbed the political ladder deploying anti-gender and anti-immigrant rhetoric. As minister, Krajniak erased the word gender from internal documents and bodies of the Ministry and halted state support aimed at promoting gender equality (Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019).

The last set of demands pertains to political representation. Exploiting low societal trust in political institutions (European Commission, 2015), anti-gender actors adopted an anti-colonial framework (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) and depicted political elites as incapable or irresponsible liberals influenced by foreign powers such as the EU and other international organisations: "I refuse, like fools, to adopt Western things into our system," proclaimed the future speaker of the parliament from the Slovak National Party, Andrej Danko (TA3, 2015a). The analysed publications further propagated the idea that the political power of the Slovak people has been constrained by local elites serving foreign interests. The same actors also deride the writing of laws, political documents, and international treaties in opaque language that is impossible for ordinary citizens to understand and complain about supposedly dysfunctional institutional processes and the impossibility of ordinary citizens to be heard or change anything. Against this backdrop, various actors clamour for greater transparency and clarity concerning political processes, heightened Slovak autonomy, and expanded tools for ordinary people to gain a political voice and representation. As one of the referendum initiators Anton Chromík states:

> It is therefore important to say to politicians that this is our limit. This is where your mandate comes from, you represent us and you need to know our position….That is why the referendum is important, because it will be the expression of the people who are important. (Chromík in TA3, 2015a)

The same complexity of cultural, social, and political dimensions can be found in the equivalential chain consolidated under the demand for "the protection of life" (Table 2). Between 2018 and 2021, more than 20 anti-abortion laws were introduced in the Slovak parliament. Initially, the demands regarded mostly the protection of the right to life from conception to natural death, the "protection of children," and "liberation" from Communist-era legislation and "neomarxist" doctrines, but the discourse shifted in 2020 and focused more on social and economic support for women and families. An anti-abortion bill introduced in 2021 by a group of coalition politicians was called "a bill on the protection of pregnant women" (Maďarová, 2021). This strategy proved quite successful in gaining social, media, and political support. While none of the bills ultimately gained parliamentary approval (as of yet), the two framed in terms of emotional and socio-economic support for pregnant women were just one vote shy of passage.

Once the equivalential chain is consolidated, the central demand represents all the others (Laclau, 2005).

Table 2. The equivalential chain of demands—protection of life.

Protection of life		
Cultural recognition	Material distribution	Political representation
Protection of the right to life from conception to natural death	Support of social reproduction and "improving quality of life"	Individual freedom and state autonomy
Reproduction of the Slovak nation and solution to the demographic crisis		Political voice and representation
Protection of children	Respect, social, and economic support for pregnant women	
Protection of pregnant women	Economic support for poor (employed) women and families	
Protection of the current structures of society and protection of the "civilization''	Social and material support for elderly and sick people	
Family mainstreaming		
Psychological and material support for women who have been raped		
Support network for women who do not want to have children—anonymous childbirth, financial support, housing		
Liberating society from Communist legislation and Neomarxism		

In other words, the demand to "protect family" or to "protect life" is not mere resentment and a demand for cultural recognition, but it represents further partial demands for material security and political representation. In this process, the anti-gender actors name "the insecurities and injustices created through the process of socio-economic transformation guided by the principles of the neoliberal policy consensus" (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 165) and subsume them under the umbrella of gender and equality policies. Moreover, the anti-gender actors come up with an alternative to the failed liberal policies and consolidate an "illiberal offer" based on values such as family, paid work, and nation.

4.2. The Conservative People Must Be Represented

As every equivalential chain assumes that individual demands have been already formulated but failed to be satisfied (Laclau, 2005), the analysed materials imply that those responsible for unmet demands of the Slovak majority are the "liberal elites":

> This is exactly what liberals are doing today—under the guise of freedom, they are taking up bombs that kill. Abortion? Physical murder of our children, not a woman's right. We have already murdered millions….Or the second bomb that the liberals are taking up—the gender ideology. The moral murder of our children. The third bomb is euthanasia….The fourth bomb is civil partnerships, the moral murder of marriage. I'm talking about the liberal octopus spreading the culture of death. Any disorder spreads death. (Kuffa in Bán, 2019)

As illustrated by Marián Kuffa, an influential Catholic priest and anti-gender actor, local and international liberal ideas represent an adversary constructed in this discursive process and pose physical and moral danger to children, heteronormative families, society, and civilization. In relation to the social demands, those responsible for poor living conditions are the elites who were either too corrupt or too busy with the rights of minorities and EU/Western requirements to deal with people's needs. The demands regarding political representation were thwarted by those making the rules at international level (EU, Council of Europe, or Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence [GREVIO]) or those local experts, activists, and politicians ignoring the will of the Slovak people. While these groups of adversaries are internally diverse, they all include an important group of liberal elites. Such a construction resonates with the disappointment with local politics and imperatives connected to EU integration and catching-up with the West. Liberals come to represent the main subject against which the "we" is constructed: "Such a move is necessary to draw the political frontier separating the 'we' from the 'they,' which is decisive in the construction of a 'people' " (Mouffe, 2018, p. 63).

However, contrary to the claims of some authors (e.g., Payne, 2019), the people as a collective subject constructed through this discourse is not a mass or an identity of "a people-as-one." The people remain a heterogenous subject (Mouffe, 2018) and its multiplicity is not considered a problem when the subject is being represented. We argue that this collective subject is constructed around demands rather than around identity, supporting the idea that demand rather than identity is the smallest unit of politics (Laclau, 2005, p. 73). As every demand is split, "on the one hand it is its own particularized self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of the other demands" (Laclau, 2005, p. 37), subjects demanding cultural recognition, material distribution, and political representation are linked together. And through an adversary—the liberal elites—they are consolidated as the "we" to a collective subject.

As we found out in the discourse analysis, the story presented by the anti-gender actors is a story of awakening. People were trying to voice their concerns and demands but for a long time they were overlooked and not taken seriously. Now they won't be silenced anymore—they organise petitions (more than a million people voted in the 2015 referendum) and they organise protests. The experiences from the 2015 referendum are likened to the Velvet Revolution that overturned the state socialist regime in 1989. "Civil society has awakened," claimed one of the leaders of the anti-gender movements (Chromík in TA3, 2015a).

While capitalizing on other protests that took place around the country to demand political change, uncorrupted "decent politics," or better working conditions, the analysed materials couch those awakenings in conservative terms. Conservative judges, journalists, parents, doctors, teachers, activists, and ordinary citizens are repeatedly discussed (as also visible in Figure 3). In accordance with Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of populism, this does not mean that the anti-gender actors necessarily represent an already existing conservative majority in Slovakia. Rather it is through this discourse that different segments of the population, ranging from families lacking sufficient state support, people struggling with debt and unmet material needs, and people rebelling against politics to Catholics, homophobic, and sexist people, are consolidated into one collective subject called conservative. The term "conservative" thus gains a new meaning, covering cultural, material, and political aspects of demands. It also means that the salience of the term "conservative people" does not entail that the majority of Slovak population necessarily adheres to traditionally conservative values.

With the "illiberal offer" providing an alternative to the many failures of post-socialist neoliberal policies and with the consolidated conservative collective subject, the anti-gender actors demand to be represented in the political bodies, from the advisory expert bodies dealing with equality policies to the decision-making institutions. New conservative media were established to explicitly

represent conservative citizens and their worldview (mk, 2015, 2020), to balance the ostensibly liberal mainstream media. The Ministry of Labour prepared changes in terminology, funding, institutional structures, and policies so they too reflect the needs and worldviews of the conservative majority (Valkovičová & Maďarová, 2019).

5. Conclusions

This article examined how a new collective subject—a conservative people—came to life in Slovak politics. Quantitative content analysis of Slovak media outputs in election years between 2002 and 2020 uncovered the rapid growth in the emphasis on the signifiers "conservative" and "liberal" when discussing local politics and society. It also showed how emphasis has shifted away from institutions as the carriers of the "conservative" label toward individual politicians and, especially, toward a collective subject—people.

It was the anti-gender discourse that accelerated the use of "conservative" and "liberal" terms and the discursive shift. Therefore, the qualitative part of our analysis scrutinized interviews and debates with anti-gender actors and treated their discourse as populist practice (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). While most academic scholarship dealing with anti-gender politics focuses on issues related to gender equality and the rights of LGBTI people, we identified three types of demands articulated in the anti-gender discourse: demands for cultural recognition, material distribution, and political representation. An "illiberal offer" of the anti-gender actors thus consists of these three dimensions.

As the demands were consolidated into a chain of equivalences, it put the responsibility and blame for the failing policies solely on the "liberal elites." Against this background, an awakening of a new collective body, the "conservative people," was constructed. Our analysis supports scholarship claiming that illiberal or far-right actors utilise populist practice to construct a wide collective political body (Payne, 2019; Wielowiejski, 2020). However, it emphasises that this heterogeneous collective subject is constructed around demands rather than identities. With the demands consolidated into an equivalential chain and the "illiberal offer" resonating with actual social and political issues, anti-gender actors have been able to change the common sense, policies, state funding, and the structure of political institutions in the name of the interests of the "conservative people."

This study illustrates how the demands often interpreted in terms of cultural recognition are rooted in broader socioeconomic processes. The construction of the new collective subject "conservative people" can present a form of reaction to the perceived weakening of people's democratic sovereignty (Mouffe, 2018) and the technocratic Europeanization (Rawłuszko, 2021) in post-state-socialist countries. Against an international backdrop that has witnessed differences between left and right policies become increasingly blurred (Kováts, 2018; Mouffe, 2018), heightened social conflicts are translated in terms of morality (Vargovčíková, 2021). It appears that different actors calling themselves conservative reflect these changes and incorporate them into their political agendas. Exploiting the effects of "neoliberal neopatriarchy" (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 7) and with effective progressive opposition mostly absent, various actors can formulate a new illiberal political project under the umbrella of conservative politics.

While the illiberal turn has been an international phenomenon, illiberalism as a form of political practice feeds on local insecurities and problems (Pető, 2021) and thus prompts different local manifestations. By examining the Slovak case and its illiberal changes, less pronounced and comprehensive than those in Hungary and Poland, the article offers insight into the more subtle and incremental nature of the illiberal transformation underway.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the academic editors of this thematic issue as well as the four anonymous reviewers for their most helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article. The work on this study has been conducted within the project "Politics of emotions as a form of political inclusion and exclusion," which was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency (APVV-17–0596).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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