Article

Leading the Way, but Also Following the Trend: The Slovak National Party

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Abstract
Despite spells outside parliament, with its blend of nationalist and populist appeals the Slovak National Party (SNS) has been a prominent fixture on Slovakia's political scene for three decades. Unlike some of the newer parties in Slovakia and across the region, partly as a product of the point of its (re-)creation, SNS has a comparable organizational density to most established parties in the country and has invested in party branches and recruiting members. Although ordinary members exercised some power and influence during the fissiparous era of the early 2000s, SNS has been notable for the role played by its leader in decision-making and steering the party. Each leader placed their stamp on the projection, pitch and functioning of the party, both as a decision-making organization and an electoral vehicle. Ordinary members have been largely—but not exclusively—relegated to the role of cheerleaders and campaigners for the party's tribunes; a situation which has not changed significantly in the era of social media. The pre-eminent position of the leader and the limited options for "voice" has led unsuccessful contenders for top posts and their supporters to opt instead for "exit." Despite having some of the traits of the mass party and having engaged in some of the activities common for mass parties, especially in the earlier years of its existence, in more recent times in particular, SNS falls short of the mass party model both in aspiration and reality.

1. Introduction

Slovenská národná strana (SNS, The Slovak National Party) has been one of the perennials of party politics in Slovakia. Even though it lost its parliamentary representation in 2002 and 2012, it managed to bounce back at the subsequent election regaining seats in parliament and go straight into government. Although never the main partner, SNS served in several coalitions in Slovakia including a junior role in the 2016–2020 government; a role that cost the party at the 2020 elections when it

again lost its representation in parliament. Yet despite its prominent role in Slovak politics, apart from one contribution to an edited volume (Hudek, 2004) and an article (Konečný & Zetocha, 2005), both published a decade and a half ago, it has not been the subject of a specific study.

Coverage of SNS is usually wrapped up in studies of parties in general (e.g., Dolný & Malová, 2016; Ondruchová, 2000; Rybář, 2011), Slovakia's political trajectory (e.g., Fisher, 2006), or the fate of the radical right across Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Bustikova, 2020; Pirro, 2015). In contrast, the neofascist right, Ľudová

strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS, People's Party Our Slovakia) led by Marian Kotleba which won 8% in the 2016 and 2020 elections has attracted much more scholarly attention (e.g., Harris, 2019; Voda et al., 2021). In a party system and a region where many parties live fast and die young and where failure to cross the electoral threshold is usually a nail in a party's coffin, SNS deserves attention both for its endurance and its ability to bounce back from poor election results—a feat it has achieved twice. Moreover, in light of this thematic issue's focus on organizational structures, SNS is notable for being a strongly centralized party with its leader having almost dictatorial powers. This structure accords the party (or rather the leader) some flexibility, but it also poses a risk as the party's fortunes become highly contingent on the captain of the ship.

This article seeks to provide an examination of SNS, in particular its organizational structures. Two characteristics of the party's organization are striking. Firstly, although the party is both formally and in practice leader-driven, SNS has thrown out its leader several times, on one occasion causing a damaging split. Secondly, the party has a much more developed organizational structure than some of the newer parties in the country, but a comparable membership and organizational structure to other long-standing parties. Both of these observations highlight two themes that run through this article: The fate of the party has been inextricably linked to questions surrounding the leadership of the party; and the organizational structures of SNS and parties in general in Slovakia are best seen as products of timing. There is, therefore, a "generation effect" dependent on when a party was born (van Biezen, 2005). In line with broader findings from across Central and Eastern Europe, in terms of organization, older parties tend to resemble one another as do newer ones whatever ideological persuasion they may have. Older parties tend to have more well-developed organizational structures (larger memberships, etc.), whereas newer parties have lighter organizational structures and tend to be much more reliant on new forms of communication (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020). Although the latter characteristics are no bars to success in the short-term—in fact they can even be an advantage—well-developed organizational structures cushion blows when parties lose support and accord them a better chance of being able to bounce back.

There is a significant body of literature examining party organization in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021; Ibenskas, 2014; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Tavits, 2013), exploring the role organization has played in the fate of political parties highlighting the role of legacies and choices made by parties. Our study forms part of a thematic issue featuring numerous case studies focused on whether the mass party model endures in contemporary Europe, particularly among those parties which have been labelled radical right and right-wing populist parties. As the editors' close reading of the literature shows (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), the key features of the mass party organizational model include a drive to recruit a large activist membership as a way of reaching out to the public, rootedness on the ground, and the provision of a variety of activities to members.

We argue that there are some discernible traits of the mass party model present in the history of SNS. In the 1990s, in line with many of the other parties in parliament at the time, the party did invest in an organizational model which at least aimed towards the involvement of grassroots activists and the shaping of political identities akin to the mass party model, especially in its heartlands (Deegan-Krause, 2000; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016). Moreover, in the 1990s the party had links to various nationalist organizations. By the time it returned to government in 2016 after its second spell without parliamentary representation, however, the party may have been more mass-like than many of the newer parties in Slovakia, but it fell well short of the mass party model. The party, for instance, had little to no ancillary organization that would or could socialize party members. Moreover, the attachment of voters and members to the party has been rather weak. Following a dramatic drop in electoral support combined with the loss of over 55% of its members, since losing its parliamentary representation for a second time in 2020, the party's focus has been primarily on survival.

Following the common framework of this thematic issue, this article begins by providing an account of the party's ideology and historical development, before turning to the questions of organizational structure and the role of the leader raised by the editors in their introduction. As the timing of SNS's formation and leadership choices is central to understanding the form, content, and dynamic of SNS, we devote more space in this contribution than others to the historical development of the party.

2. The Trajectory of the Slovak National Party

Although officially registered as a party on 7 March 1990, SNS has consistently claimed links to the original Slovak National Party formed in 1871 (e.g., Slovenská národná strana, 2015; Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article II § 3 No. 2). The creation—or what some in SNS would prefer to see as the re-creation—of the party owed much to the rekindling of the debate about Slovakia's place in Czechoslovakia and the status of the Slovak language. SNS, however, was not the only entity or even political party agitating on the national question (Malová, 2003). Whereas other parties, in particular Hnutie za Democratické Slovensko (HZDS, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia), advocated greater autonomy, SNS pushed for independence.

The break-up of Czechoslovakia and the foundation of an independent Slovak state in January 1993 opened up a dispute within SNS between the conservative-liberal

pragmatism of Ľudovit Černák who became the party's leader in October 1992, and a more radical nationalist faction. The latter won the battle, removing Černák as chairman and propelling Ján Slota to the leadership of the party in February 1994. Slota set the ideological tone for the party for the following quarter of a century. Ethnic Hungarians (which made up around a tenth of the population of Slovakia) and their kin state were the main target for Slota's ire and boorish behaviour, but Slovakia's other significant ethnic minority, the Roma, were also subject to his coarse tongue. Under Slota, SNS was driven by a desire to defend the integrity of the Slovak state, promote Slovak culture, and ensure Slovak schools did not become breeding grounds for Hungarian interests.

SNS's nativist recipe proved appealing for a significant slice of the electorate at a succession of elections (e.g., Krivý, 1999; Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020; see Table 1). The party failed to cross the threshold in 2002 due to a split linked to the leadership role of Slota which we discuss below, but the fission was followed soon after the election by a fusion. In 2006 the party achieved its second-best result (11.73%), not only returning to parliament, but also as a junior party in government. But this was a high-water mark of popularity to which the party never returned, although the party did achieve 8.64% and again became part of the governing coalition in 2016.

SNS's electoral decline owed much to the changing context of politics, the loss of its standard-bearer status and decisions made by larger parties. Central to SNS's appeal from the early 1990s had been its anti-Hungarian sentiment, but the potency of this rhetoric waned as Slovakia's years of independence and EU membership grew. Moreover, the ethnic Hungarian vote itself had split with a new party, Most-Híd (taking the word for bridge from both Slovak and Hungarian), seeking to bridge the divide between the two ethnic groups. But by the 2016 election, in the minds of voters the perceived threat to the Slovak nation came less from an internal fifth column and more from the external threat of immigration, a fear fuelled by Europe's migration crisis (Pytlas, 2019). Nevertheless, by 2016 SNS had lost its

status as the standard-bearer of Slovak nationalism. Not only did the main ruling party Smer-sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD, Direction-Social Democracy) shift its rhetoric in the latter half of 2015 and make "We defend Slovakia" its main slogan, but the 2016 election saw the breakthrough of the neo-fascist ĽSNS.

SNS entered government in 2016, but the very configuration of the 2016–2020 coalition sat uncomfortably with a party espousing Slovak nationalism: One of SNS's coalition partners was Most-Híd, whose support base was drawn from ethnic Hungarians and liberal Slovaks (Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020). But the period was also striking for the rise in salience of the theme of governance (and more specifically corruption), particularly after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018. Outrage at the murder and corruption in the country generated the context for Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti's (OĽaNO, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) anti-corruption appeal to succeed and a drop in support for all the governing parties including SNS (Haughton et al., 2021). Nonetheless, SNS's slump also owed something to scandals surrounding Danko himself. In 2020 the party lost its seats in parliament, mustering a mere 3.16%.

3. More Than Many, but not Massive: Slovak National Party's Organization

Several studies of political parties in Slovakia have underlined their low levels of membership, underdeveloped territorial organizations, weak linkages with society and organized interests, and high levels of financial dependency on the state (e.g., Dolný & Malová, 2016; Rybář, 2011). Nonetheless, there are some striking variations. But these variations have less to do with parties' place on the ideological spectrum and more to do with when they were founded and how. Parties are products of their time. Generally, the older the party, the more extensive the party's organizational structure. Given the centrality of the party leadership to SNS's organizational structure we leave details of the party congress (which only elected delegates can attend) and the composition of the

Table 1. Election results for SNS in parliamentary elections.

Election	Votes (%)	Seats in 150-seat parliament	% of seats in parliament
1990	13.94	22	14.7%
1992	7.93	15	10.0%
1994	5.40	9	6.0%
1998	9.07	14	9.3%
2002	3.32	0	0
2006	11.73	20	13.3%
2010	5.07	9	6.0%
2012	4.55	0	0
2016	8.64	15	10.0%
2020	3.16	0	0

Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2020).

party's Presidium (which is determined significantly by the leader) until the following section.

Although we need to treat self-reported membership figures for all parties with a pinch of salt given the alleged inflation of those figures, the official figures stated in reports submitted to the Ministry of the Interior remain the most reliable guide. As Table 2 highlights, membership varies significantly. SNS and the other parties founded in the 1990s have considerably higher levels of membership. Even Smer-SD, which had begun life as the project of one man, embarked on a deliberate strategy of party building in the aftermath of its disappointing election result in 2002 and has relatively high levels of membership. In contrast, two of the parties that performed well in the 2020 elections and went into government, Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS, Freedom and Solidarity) and OĽaNO, have low levels of membership, the latter's membership limited for most of its existence to the four founding figures of the party. Both parties were formed a decade ago, born in an new era where mass organization seemed so passé, so 20th century.

The membership figures in Table 2, however, are striking not just for the stark differences in headline figures between older and newer parties, but also the trends. The two parties with the largest members, Smer-SD and the Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH, Christian Democratic Movement) have either a stable (the former) or a declining (the latter) level of membership from the mid-2000s. In contrast, there is a marked increase in SNS membership in the mid-2010s. The rise in members of SNS after 2012 owes something to an injection of additional effort into recruitment. But the greatest boost came from the departure of the controversial leader Ján Slota and his replacement by Andrej Danko who was very much seen as an asset for the party until the party entered government again in 2016. The sharp fall in party membership since the 2020 elections (down from 7,728 to 3,469) owes much to the negative reaction to Danko's decision to run again for re-election.

The decision to grow SNS's party membership was linked to two key factors. Firstly, growing membership had an important signalling function. After the years of decline under Slota, a growth in membership helped to send a signal out to the wider electorate that the party was vibrant and relevant. Secondly, Danko and the new leadership of the party were keen to emphasize the importance of members. Membership was seen as a sign not just of the party's virility, but also of its ties to the electorate. Here there is an important element not just of the mass party model, but also of what we might label a populist appeal. In contrast to several new and popular political parties that have few members, Danko was keen to project his party as one of ordinary Slovaks in contrast to parties like OĽaNO that claim to represent ordinary people, but are—in Danko's eyes at least—simply pet projects of political entrepreneurs. Although these signalling motivations mattered, another driving force at this point arguably was simply the bottom line. The party needed money. As Figure 1 illustrates, between 2006 and 2011 when the party was in parliament, state funding provided a large proportion of the party's income, but SNS's loss of seats in 2012 led to four years in which the party needed to turn to other sources of income. Membership fees became more significant for the party during SNS's second stint as an extra-parliamentary party, but those revenue streams were overshadowed by loans it took out. SNS borrowed heavily including €759,100 worth of loans in 2015 and €1,259,750 in 2016. Moreover, official reports suggest that the vast majority of the party's membership contributions actually came from a narrow group of top party officials, raising some doubt about ultimately how important ordinary members were to the generation of revenue.

Table 2. Membership figures.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
SNS	**1,198**	**1,370**	**1,531**	**1,617**	**1,839**	**2,412**	**2,335**	**3,130**	**3,884**	**6,155**	**7,189**	**7,489**	**7,604**	**7,728**
Smer-SD	15,132	15,855	15,636	16,263	16,869	15,817	16,376	16,543	16,167	15,862	15,605	15,182	14,626	14,136
KDH	17,814	15,927	14,964	14,645	15,360	14,704	13,024	12,031	11,704	11,180	9,807	8,948	8,796	8,048
SMK	11,959	11,964	11,745	10,950	10,750	10,950	9,800	10,040	10,320	10,075	9,256	9,197	9,119	9,233
Most-Híd	—	—	—	1,288	4,029	4,642	4,892	5,098	5,350	5,414	5,583	5,492	5,527	5,547
ĽSNS	—	—	—	4	11	99	162	193	45	96	796	1,439	1,510	1,460
SaS	—	—	—	195	271	281	292	192	166	154	164	189	205	188
OLaNO	—	—	—	—	—	4	4	4	4	4	13	13	4	45
Sme Rodina	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	450	638	1,338	1,684

Source: Národná rada Slovenskej republiky and Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky (2006–2019).
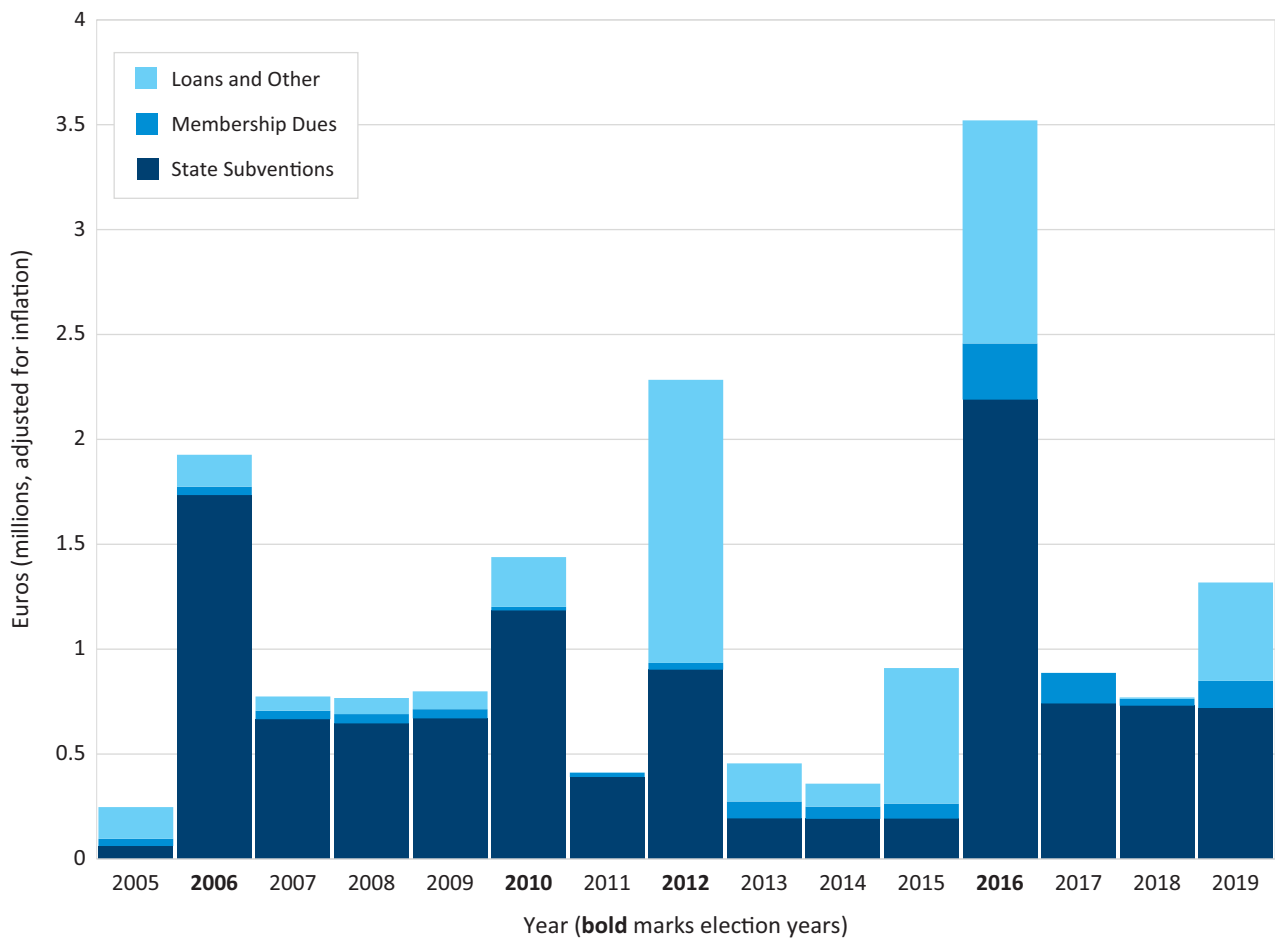
Figure 1. SNS income. Source: Národná rada Slovenskej republiky and Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky (2006–2019).

Although the impetus for increasing membership came from the SNS leadership, the party's recruitment drive was largely a product of people-to-people persuasion. While we do not have robust enough data to make definitive arguments, it was striking in the 2012–2016 period how much SNS's membership drive and general campaigning was concentrated not on political gatherings, but rather on popular and community events like municipal or regional fairs, Christmas markets, etc., where the local and regional party activists would distribute leaflets and have stalls to "sell" the party alongside craftspeople selling their goods.

Reflective of the increased connectivity of citizens of Slovakia, the use of social media and the internet became more important after 2016, but our analysis of SNS's website and Facebook feed highlights that these modern tools were more often than not used to persuade readers and followers to attend meetings and events where formal recruitment would take place. As one of the reviewers of this manuscript suggested, two additional sources of new members may have also played a role in the increased membership. Firstly, a number of politicians associated with the once dominant party of Slovak politics, HZDS, became part of the SNS leadership and parliamentary representation after 2016, indi-

cating one source of new members was former supporters and members of HZDS. Secondly, close friends and family members of existing members may have joined SNS to help bolster the overall figures. Whilst there is anecdotal evidence of both of these phenomena, it is not possible, however, to say from existing data sources how widespread and significant these have been.

In a similar vein to membership, the extent of party organizational structures was far more developed in those parties formed in the 1990s to those in more recent times. SNS built significant local and regional structures in their early years, especially in its heartland of North and Central Slovakia, although these structures were far less developed both in terms of the number of paid employees and party branches than other parliamentary parties formed in the 1990s (Ondruchová, 2000). The regional structures played an active role in the party's successful national election campaign in 2016 organizing dozens of meetings, but four years later there was far less activity. For the entire month of January, the sum total of the activity of regional structures appeared to be a football tournament and an event marking the handing over of a reconstructed Cultural Centre (Šnídl, 2020b). But even the role of the regional structures in SNS's success in 2016 can be overstated. Media coverage

of Danko, especially on the TV news channel TA3, significantly contributed to the return of the party to parliament after four years in the wilderness.

The party's campaign in 2020 focused much more on social media with the party spending the second highest amount (€90,736) of any party on Facebook and Instagram in the year before polling (Zelenayová, 2020). But this was largely a centrally-organized and conducted social media campaign with a strong focus on the party leader. Since the election, social media has become an even more important tool for the party, due in part to their extra-parliamentary status, but also to the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which may go some way to explaining the sum total of four physical activities by SNS regional branches in the 12 months from March 2020. The leader-centric nature of the party's communication strategy was also in evidence from the videos posted on the party's website, which for the entire first year after the 2020 elections amounted to Danko's announcements and statements, even including a video of the leader stating he was running for re-election. His opponent in the election, however, was not accorded the same opportunity.

Danko himself was instrumental in initiating a new party law in 2018 laying out minimal organizational parameters of political parties running in parliamentary elections. The motivation for this law was to hamper SNS's opponents (both existing and potential) and to a lesser extent solidify Danko's position inside his own party. In terms of the former, in a clear swipe at some of the opposition parties with underdeveloped party organizations, SNS's leader argued that its aim was to prevent rich political entrepreneurs from setting up or taking over parties and making them their political tools ("Danko: Zákon o," 2019). Danko's call for "normal regular structures" was explicitly directed at OĽaNO and SaS which, as Table 2 shows, only had 13 and 187 members respectively at the time, but had defeated SNS candidates in regional elections in 2017. Moreover, Danko's call for tighter control of how a party leader spends party funds helped shine more light on allegations that Kotleba had spent ĽSNS funds to purchase a private dwelling rather than on his party headquarters. But it was striking that the law passed in 2019 stopped short of introducing effective measures to increase intra-party democracy and hence did not impinge on the unrestrained intra-party position of the SNS leader within his own party (The National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2018).

Mass membership has not been central to SNS strategy (perhaps with the exception of the early 1990s, when most relevant parties sought ties to societal organizations and society at large via extensive membership). Because the party's electoral failures were linked to internal intra-elite fights leading to splits, defections and a loss of membership base, the party leaders who took over were concerned with cementing their own positions, and only then with repairing the basic party infrastructure. District and regional party units had to be rebuilt as they often ceased to exist due to defections and/or expulsion of members. As various corruption cases demonstrate, SNS—a frequent junior coalition partner—has always attracted a portion of rent-seeking activists. In addition, although new party leaders tended to act as magnets in membership recruitment, there is little evidence of a sustained and deliberate effort to encapsulate and socialize party members within the party structures.

4. Leading the Way: The Role of the Party Leader

At the heart of the trajectory of SNS since its foundation in the early 1990s is a paradox. The party has been one of the most leader-dominated parties in Slovakia, but has undergone no fewer than six leadership changes. The party's longest serving leader (chair), Slota, was central to two changes in the leadership. In 1999 he was successfully challenged when 237 of 403 of the party's regional delegates voted to oust him; a decision Slota reacted to by turning off the lights in the room and declaring the vote invalid. Moreover, after a prolonged period of tension he left the party along with several other senior figures and formed a breakaway, the Pravá Slovenská národná strana (PSNS, True Slovak National Party). The fission proved damaging for both parties as they both fell below the 5% electoral threshold, prompting them to fuse in May 2003. Slota returned to the leadership as party chair and his erstwhile nemesis, SNS leader Anna Malíková-Belousovová who had led the challenge four years earlier, became first vice-chair. The party re-unification was the single most important moment in the organizational development of the party. Before the party split, the key role of the party leader was much more a matter of informal influence and power. Since re-unification, however, the party chair's unshakeable position has been enshrined in the party statutes. As chair, Slota acquired a slew of rights and powers including the right to co-opt an additional and unlimited number of members of the party Presidium, the formal right to block and veto any personnel related decisions of other SNS bodies, and the exclusive right to rank-order the candidates on the party's single national list for parliamentary elections.

Slota's ignominious departure from the leadership and his return in 2003 to both the party and its helm prompted changes to safeguard the position of leader, thereby providing to all intents and purposes SNS's old–new leader with an unconstrained control over the party. These changes, however, can be seen as continuing the general direction of travel since the early 1990s. In formal terms, the party statutes have been amended 11 times since their initial approval in 1990. Although some changes were provoked by wider political developments such as the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the creation of regional structures of government in Slovakia, the main trend has been to tighten the control of the party's central organs (Hudek, 2004).

Rather ironically for Slota, the formal power of the leader was in evidence when he stepped down in 2012 after the party's poor showing in the elections and as accusations of misuse of party funds began to escalate. Slota expressed the need to pass the baton to a new generation of politicians and recommended to the party congress that his close associate, vice-chair Andrej Danko, become leader. Although the anointed successor praised Slota and recommended the long-time leader be elevated to the post of honorary chairman, this post proved to be purely honorific without any formal powers. Once enshrined as party chair, Danko moved against his former political master and was instrumental in Slota's expulsion from the party in 2013 over mismanagement and financial irregularities ("Jána Slotu vylúčili," 2013). The formal decision to cast out SNS's long-time leader was made not by Danko alone, but by the party's Presidium. Whilst some of the Presidium members elected by the SNS congress did not support the move, the key votes in the Presidium were cast by members co-opted by Danko himself, indicating that the party chair had used his strong formal powers to impose his will against the wishes of a sizeable portion of the SNS rank-and-file.

Although the party statutes have been amended since Slota left office, they remain clear about the elevated position of the party leader. He/she may be answerable to the party's Presidium, but the party leader may select and appoint the members of his leadership team and the party general secretary without any constraints from other party bodies. Even though the party deputy chairs are elected by the party congress, the party leader has the sole right to propose to congress a candidate for the position. More broadly, he/she has the right of veto over personnel questions. He/she appoints and dismisses the central election team for national and European elections, election managers at the local and regional level, and the party official media spokesperson (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 17). The party chair also has the final say over who runs for office on the party ticket. In the run-up to the 2016 elections, for instance, Danko used his leadership prerogative to dismiss the deputy-chair and the number six on the party's electoral list, Vladimír Chovan. Four years later, Danko removed another deputy chair, Ján Krišanda, from the SNS list. The motivations for the two dismissals may have been different, but both underscored the powers of the leader (Šnídl, 2016).

The decisive role of the party leader over personnel questions was also in evidence when SNS agreed to be part of a coalition government in 2016. Nomination of non-party experts is not unusual in Central European politics where expertise is venerated, but it was striking that all three individuals chosen to lead the ministries allocated to SNS were non-party technocrats who had not run in the parliamentary elections. Although publicly justifying the nominations on the basis of their expertise, appointing government ministers with no formal party affiliation had the benefit of helping forge ties of loyalty to the leader and helped insulate them from the rest of SNS's party organization; all of which further strengthened Danko. The ministers were subsequently invited to join SNS during the parliamentary term after they had demonstrated their loyalty and trustworthiness. When one of them was forced to leave following controversy surrounding the allocation of European funds, he was replaced by another non-party nominee with expertise who subsequently joined SNS.

In a similar vein, the SNS leader exercised strong control over other party nominations. By virtue of being a governing party in 2016–2020, SNS gained the right to nominate its people to several semi-state and public bodies, such as the Agricultural Paying Agency in charge of handing subsidies to farmers and state-owned companies including Agrokomplex and Horeza. Subsequently, one of Danko's critics revealed no party body ever discussed these nominations. They were simply the result of discretionary powers of the party chairman (Hlucháňová, 2020). The centrality of Danko to decision-making was also well-illustrated by his sudden decision in August 2017 to terminate the coalition agreement his party was part of (which was subsequently amended) much to the surprise of other members of the SNS leadership (Terenzani, 2017).

Given all of these examples, it was no surprise that when Danko's deputy chairman Zelník resigned after the disastrous 2020 elections, he claimed the party was fully controlled by the leader. All the important decisions were taken by Danko himself and there were no discussions allowed at the party congress ("Podpredseda SNS Zelník," 2020). Formally, however, the party congress is the most important organ of the party. The congress is the body that decides the party's fundamental direction, approves the key programmatic documents, and changes the party statutes themselves. But in reality, its power is circumscribed and various provisions in the statutes ensure the key levers of power ultimately rest in the hands of the party leader. The party congress, for instance, does have the right to vote to remove the party's leader, but only on a recommendation by the SNS Regional Council (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 15). The regional chairs, however, can be dismissed by the party's Presidium (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 16). In turn, the Presidium is very much in the grip of the party leader. Called by the party leader "according to need, but at least once every two months" (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 16), the Presidium makes many key decisions over the conduct and organization of the party. However, of its 24 members, one third are nominated and dismissed by the party leader. Included in the other 16 are the party leader himself/herself and the deputy chairs (currently seven) with the others made up of those elected by the party congress (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article VI § 16). Strikingly, fewer than half of the members of the new SNS Presidium elected/appointed in September 2020 nearly

half (11) were not Presidium members in 2019. The turnover indicates both Danko's powerful position and the primary importance of securing the leader's position before any concerted attempts to recruit members.

Timing matters not just in comedy, but also in politics. Although the party congress has significant formal powers, it meets once every four years which has meant in the past decade it has met shortly *after* parliamentary elections are held, depriving the rank-and-file of an opportunity to input into decision-making or simply vent their frustrations. There was a festive congress held in 2018, but no decisions were taken on the party's leadership or programme at that gala, although Danko did announce he would not run for the presidency of Slovakia. Deprived of voice, exit becomes the strategy open to the discontented. Hence, in the run-up to the 2020 elections, several disaffected high-profile local and regional SNS representatives defected to support other parties like Vlasť (Homeland) and Sme Rodina (We Are Family). Danko, however, shrugged off the departures by pointing to the fact that no-one had left the SNS contingent in parliament, a striking contrast to all other parliamentary parties (Šnídl, 2020a).

The role of members also highlights the gap between the formal and real picture of power. Formally, members of SNS have the right to participate in the creation and carrying out of the party's policies, propose candidates to the organs of the party, participate in party meetings, and request responses from the chairperson and other central organs of the party (Slovenská národná strana, 2019, Article IV §7 No. 1). But in reality they have limited powers. The power of the SNS leader over the organizational structures of the party, for instance, was well illustrated in July 2017 when Eduard Markovič was removed as the head of SNS in the eastern region of Prešov. Although the national party leadership had proposed its own candidate, Markovič was chosen by the regional body. However, not only was the national leadership instrumental in Markovič's recall, but also that of three other significant figures in the Prešov region, prompting Markovič to remark that all party members must accept without question what the chairman says ("Odvolaný vysoký funkcionár," 2017).

Danko was initially a popular figure. After the 2016 election he was viewed positively, but this quickly changed thanks to a series of scandals surrounding the SNS leader, including plagiarizing his university thesis and sending flirtatious messages to a woman implicated in the events surrounding the murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová. But he was also ridiculed for frequent lack of linguistic competence in his mother tongue and when the minister of defence (an SNS-nominee) promoted him to the rank of captain. After SNS's poor performance in the February 2020 elections, Danko announced he would not seek re-election as the party's leader, claiming it was a time for Slovakia to recharge its batteries. The party's poll rating continued to slide, but Danko changed his mind and ran for re-election win-

ning the support of 88 of the 126 delegates at the party congress in September 2020. His challenger, Anton Hrnko, responded by announcing his departure and was followed by dozens of other delegates.

The experience of Danko's leadership of SNS, therefore, highlights the risks of a party organizational strategy that endows the party leader with a decisive say in almost all decisions. It may provide flexibility and an ability to react swiftly to the changing public mood, but it makes the party's fortunes contingent on the captain of the ship and accords others in the party few options beyond staying silent or bailing from the boat.

5. Conclusion

In the early 1990s, SNS followed the trend in Slovakia and built a party organization with branches across the country and a significant membership. But the most striking aspect of the party's organizational structure was—and remains—the position of the leader. Although personnel politics and the idiosyncratic history of SNS explains much about the elevated position of the party leader, it is important to stress that a low level of intraparty democracy in parties in Slovakia is the norm, with ordinary members having minimal impact on decision-making (Dolný & Malová, 2016).

The reformulation of SNS in 2003 in particular strengthened the position of party leader, relegating almost everyone else, including ordinary party members, to the role of cheerleaders. Nonetheless, members and activists played a role in keeping the party alive during its extra-parliamentary periods, something the party leadership was aware of in 2012 as it invested efforts in recruiting members. It nearly trebled party membership during the four-year term outside parliament, highlighting the signalling function membership can have for a party keen to display its vitality and relevance. Although the party managed to hold onto these levels of membership throughout the subsequent parliamentary term, the scandals of 2016–2020 and the performance of SNS's party leader led to a noticeable drop in partisan activity, the departure of some of those activists to other parties promoting a national(ist) message, and ultimately to a disastrous election result leaving the party outside parliament again. Following the election, the party's membership fell by more than half to just 3,469. Previously, the party also had some significant presence in regional or local councils, but in 2017 it secured only 15 out of 416 seats in elections to the regional assemblies. By early 2021, therefore, SNS appeared to have lost much of the "organizational" and "ideational" resources that aid party survival (Cyr, 2017) and was still languishing in the polls. The SNS eagle had not quite transmogrified into a dead parrot by 2021, but it needed to address many challenges for it to soar once again.

Placing the experience of SNS in the wider discussion of the persistence or revival of the mass party model, SNS has shown some of the traits of a mass party seen

in other cases discussed in this thematic issue. SNS has sought to promote a large membership, but its focus seems to have been more on quantity than on the activist quality stressed in the mass party model. Furthermore, especially since losing its parliamentary representation in February 2020, SNS has struggled to provide many on-the-ground activities, although admittedly the Covid-19 pandemic has made this challenging for all parties. SNS was never able to be the sole voice—and even struggled to be the main voice—for Slovak nationalism, making the forging or preservation of a collective identity much harder. The party was more mass like in aspiration than in reality, but fell short even in its aspirations. The model of the mass party becomes less relevant as parties in decline approach the threshold of survival and seize upon any resources that might offer an escape from final collapse whether in the form of a rescuing leader, a radicalization of message, or a reliance on the few remaining vibrant regional or local organizations.

In the past decade, however, two other parties in Slovakia that have displayed characteristics of the mass party are worthy of mention. ĽSNS has been able to forge a collective identity through its extreme nationalist ideology, reinforced by activities for members and the activism of its membership. ĽSNS, however, suffered a significant split in January 2021 with several leading politicians leaving the party. In a strong echo of the SNS split in 1999, the chances of either (or both) ĽSNS and the breakaway Republika crossing the parliamentary threshold at the next election look much slimmer than if they had remained united. In contrast, one of the other perennial parties of Slovakia, KDH, which like SNS has also experienced periods outside of parliament, has managed to maintain a large activist membership, rootedness on the ground, and the preservation of a collective identity through its associated and ancillary organizations. The odds of KDH rather than SNS remaining viable by the time of the next parliamentary elections and crossing the threshold look much higher. The mass party model may be derived from the experiences of another century, but it might provide a recipe for some parties to survive in the 21st century.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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