Article

On Gender and Illiberalism: Lessons From Slovak Parliamentary Debates

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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of Slovak illiberal anti-gender parliamentary discourse based on a unique dataset consisting of 85 parliamentary speeches. It presents who the main actors are in terms of the illiberal anti-gender discourse in Slovakia and which narratives they postulate. It also considers if there is any variation in the identified narratives. The qualitative content analysis covered several critical anti-gender narratives in the rhetoric of illiberal parties. I argue that the occurrence and range of anti-gender narratives within the Slovak parliamentary illiberal discourse are diverse, and this diversity varies in the ideological background of the analysed parties. While some of the more traditional Christian conservative parties, such as the KDH, and new populist parties such as OĽaNO or Sme Rodina, have articulated gender primarily as a threat to Slovak Catholics, Christianity, traditional marriage, and families, others like the nationally conservative-oriented SNS or the Smer-SD have stressed the loss of national sovereignty and legal aspects around the Istanbul Convention, and utilized this topic to strengthen their Eurosceptic rhetoric. Finally, the far-right K-ĽSNS has used an eclectic approach combining all found anti-gender narratives while using the most abusive language towards transgender persons and other sexual minorities.

Issue

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1. Introduction

The recent results of liberal democracies have brought about the disturbing statement that "liberal democracies diminished over the past decade from 41 countries to 32, with a population share of only 14%" (V-Dem Institute, 2021). The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), owing to Orbán's Hungary and Kaczyński's Poland—both representing flagships of this "illiberal turn"—has become a research laboratory for democratic backsliding (Bernhard, 2021; Cianetti et al., 2018). Yet, the illiberal and/or democratic backsliding has taken on different forms across the V4 countries. As scholars note, it is necessary to distinguish between the "illiberal turn" and "illiberal swerve" (Buštíková & Guasti, 2017). An illiberal swerve could turn to a full illiberal turn if five criteria are met in at least two electoral terms: (a) political polarisation preventing a viable consensus about the character

of the democratic polity; (b) the capture of the courts, endeavouring to dismantle the rule of law and balance of power; (c) political control over the media which involves an increased control of the state media and elimination or subordination of private media; (d) legal persecution of civil society to prevent it from protesting and mobilisation; and (e) changes in electoral rules and the constitution to permanently weaken any political opposition (Buštíková & Guasti, 2017, p. 174). When considering Orbán, who established what is known as a "diffusely defective democracy" (Bogaards, 2018, p. 1481), it has become the only regime in CEE representing a full-scale illiberal turn.

With that in mind, Czechia and Slovakia experience rather illiberal swerves: While Czechia has been threatened by "technocratic populists" (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Havlík, 2019), Slovakia has faced various attacks by the populist right, more precisely from the far-right

(Kazharski, 2019). Both types of democratic backsliding across the V4 and CEE, however, share a significant common denominator: they attacks on gender and the civil rights of the LGBTQ community (Gaweda, 2021; Grzebalska & Petö, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Żuk & Żuk, 2020).

In this context, gender issues in Slovakia have also experienced a turbulent decade. Like other countries in CEE, the main anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ waves erupted after the 2015 migration crisis when extremist and populist actors utilised Islamophobic rhetoric and then entered the Slovak parliament (Zvada, 2018). Subsequently, they have also started attacking the civil rights of underprivileged groups, mainly LGBTQ people. However, anti-gender mobilisation has been evident since the 2010s. At first, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH—Kresťansko Demokratické Hnutie), the most conservative political force in Radičová's government, blocked the founding of the Committee for the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Persons. Meanwhile, Gabriele Kuby, a well-known anti-gender activist, delivered a series of speeches in Slovakia, while the Slovak Catholic church massively supported anti-gender sentiment in society through pastoral letters and other supportive activities favouring "traditional families" and "traditional marriages." In the Slovak context, traditional families and traditional marriages stand for heterosexual marriages and heterosexual families with children. As a result, in 2014, the Slovak parliament approved Constitutional Law no. 490/2014 defining marriage as a unique union between a man and a woman, following similar moves by other countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania. This anti-gender campaign culminated in the 2015 referendum on family, in support of traditional families and against the LGBTQ minority, but the referendum failed due to a low turnout (21.41%). Finally, anti-gender discourse resurfaced again in 2018–2019 when the Istanbul Convention became an object of debate in the parliament, which consequently contributed to another fragmentation of the Slovak political spectre.

Although recent studies have focused on gender and feminist perspectives on political issues in Slovakia, they have usually concentrated on selected aspects, such as the beginnings of female suffrage in Slovakia (Kobová, 2012), or revisited the November 1989 narratives through the lens of gender (Maďarová, 2016), contemporary feminism (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021), the gender gap in Slovak politics (Hudáčková & Malová, 2021; Sloboda et al., 2021), gender with a connection to far-right political parties (Ďurinová & Malová, 2017; Rashkova, 2021), the 2015 referendum (Synek Rétiová, 2022), and the Istanbul Convention (Očenášová, 2021). However, gender and illiberalism have been examined only in a limited way. In his study, Sekerák (2020) offered an analysis of illiberal populism in Slovakia but focused only on Slovak Catholics as they expressed themselves in their documents and statements rather than polit-

ical parties and respective political positions per se. Guasti (2021), on the other hand, distinguished the Czech-Slovak nuances within the context of anti-gender rhetoric, but the investigation was primarily oriented on the Smer-SD as a dominant political actor. Then, Havlík and Hloušek (2021) contributed to illiberalism in their in-depth analysis comparing the V4 illiberal actors. They, nonetheless, also only defined Smer-SD as an illiberal actor.

This study draws upon all these previous studies, but our analysis strictly focuses on illiberal political actors and their parliamentary speeches. The structure of the article is as follows: First, the terms "gender" and "illiberalism" will be conceptualised, and their contemporary interconnections will be put forth; the circle of parties which fall on the "illiberal spectrum" of the Slovak political system will then be presented. Second, the methodology for this study is introduced; research is based on studying parliamentary debates and the overall process of gathering, coding, and visualising the data. Finally, our analysis will focus on the uniqueness and similarities of the results, discussed within the broader implications of Slovak domestic politics. The main goal of this article is to answer the following two research questions:

1. Who are the main actors in terms of the illiberal anti-gender discourse and which narratives do they postulate?
2. Is there any variation in the identified narratives?

2. Gender and Illiberalism: Conceptualisation, Mutual Relations, and the Slovak Context

The historical roots of "gender" and "illiberalism" are not direct, and both terms remain the subject of academic debate to this day. Gender is defined in many ways, depending on the context of the field of study in which it is used. Contemporary political scientists must consider at least four ways to operationalise the term gender: (a) physiological/biological aspects (sex); (b) gender identity or self-defined gender; (c) the legal gender; and (d) social gender in terms of norm-related behaviours and gender expressions (Lindqvist et al., 2021, p. 333). In general, gender can be conceptualized as a "thin" understanding of gender (as sex in binary terms) or a "thick" understanding (in binary and nonbinary terms; see Gwiazda, 2021). This article uses a "thick" conceptualisation while also including underprivileged sexual minorities (LGBTQ people).

The debate on the second key term, "illiberalism," began with Fukuyama's definition of an illiberal democracy as a political system where free elections, rule of law, separation of powers, and the protection of civil liberties are systematically undermined or do not exist (Zakaria, 1997). As Kauth and King (2020, p. 365) stated, "illiberalism has assumed an invigorated, if unanticipated, significance in the 21st century." In the recent attempt to conceptualise illiberalism, Laruelle (2022a, p. 304)

builds on the idea that illiberalism: (a) is a new ideological universe that, even if doctrinally fluid and context-based, is to some degree coherent; (b) represents a backlash against today's liberalism (political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational); (c) proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric, or sovereigntist, favouring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity; and (d) calls for a shift from politics to culture and is post-post-modern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalisation.

In general, illiberalism could be effectively conceptualised in two major ways, as "disruptive illiberalism" or as "ideological illiberalism" (Kauth & King, 2020). Disruptive illiberalism "describes antidemocratic illiberal practices…and the primary targets of such anti-democratic practices are what one might call liberal institutions, as well as electoral norms and procedures: the judiciary, the press, academia, and international NGOs" (Kauth & King, 2020, pp. 376–377). On the other hand, ideological illiberalism is characterised as "the practices that emerge from the politics of exclusion…and emerge from ideological constructions of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria" (Kauth & King, 2020, p. 380). Ideological illiberalism does not attack democratic institutions; it rather classifies "who is and who is not a full member of society based on ideological constructions of the societal in- and out-groups" (Kauth & King, 2020, p. 378).

The origin of current illiberalism in CEE is, according to Krastev and Holmes (2018), among other things, based on unsolved problems related to demographic collapse, and therefore "the arrival of foreigners will dilute national identities and weaken national cohesion." Rupnik (2016) explains that illiberal parties in the CEE gained power through a conception of nationhood that was based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity in the area, thus contrasting with Western nationhood, which is based on universalistic values and diversity. In Hungary, a significant illiberal laboratory, three important factors have helped Viktor Orbán establish an illiberal regime (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, pp. 41–43): "changes in the electoral system," "spreading a threat from Hungarian MSZP governing between 2006–2010," and "Orbán's charismatic leadership." On the other hand, some authors argue that contemporary political illiberalism in CEE combines the reception of Western critiques of liberalism with a critique of the post-communist liberals' perceived lack of willingness to break with the communist past (Buzogány & Varga, 2018).

The conceptualisation of ideological illiberalism as mentioned above is crucial regarding the current illiberal tendencies of the unequal treatment of minority rights and exclusionist politics towards gender and LGBTQ policy issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriages, or adoption rights. The current CEE *kulturkampf* inherently combines both phenomena. The existing connection between illiberalism and anti-gender mobilisation, as Korolczuk and Graff (2018) stress, lies in the fact that illib-

eral and anti-gender movements build their rhetoric on the critique of gender because it has been seen as a new phase of global colonialism and a product of neoliberal order and globalisation. Petö (2022, p. 314) also argues that "the present form of illiberalism is a joint result of the structural failures of the European (neo)liberal democratic project, the dark legacy of European history, and the complexities of the concept of gender" (see also Laruelle, 2022b, p. 216). Some authors argue that anti-gender rhetoric serves as a "symbolic glue" for different actors from the far-right, (ultra-)conservative, and other different populist groups (Kováts & Poim, 2015), or for illiberal states per se (Petö, 2022). Accordingly, in their case studies of Poland and Hungary, Grzebalska and Petö (2018) have formulated a gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation that was based on three criteria: (a) illiberalism created as an opposition to the post-1989 neoliberal equal paradigm; (b) family mainstreaming and anti-gender politics have redefined security, equality, and human rights; and (c) illiberal transformation operates through the appropriation of key concepts, tools, and funding channels of liberal equality politics.

On the other hand, Graff and Korolczuk (2022, p. 4) have examined the relationships between anti-gender movements and far-right actors when discussing the "opportunistic synergy" over a "gender agenda," and understood it as a "part of a broader conflict where what truly was at stake was the future of democracy."

Transnational or European connections between anti-gender movements have also been analysed by other works. As Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) argue, however, there is a need to identify a component in the local contexts to understand its own specificities, and contemporary illiberal contestation of liberalism cannot be merely reduced to political parties or the political level as such; instead, it must be approached as a broader phenomenon (Buzogány & Varga, 2018).

Drawing upon Kauth and King's (2020) definition of ideological illiberalism and based on the data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Figure 1 demonstrates a clear division between the Slovak liberal political and illiberal political spectrum. The first variable—*Galtan*—declares the position of the party in terms of the views on social and cultural values (0 = libertarian/postmaterialist, 5 = centrist, 10 = traditional/authoritarian). The second variable—*social lifestyle*—declares the party's position in terms of social lifestyle, e.g., equal rights for LGBTQ, gender equality, etc. (0 = strongly supporting liberal policies, 10 = strongly opposing liberal policies). Political parties such as Freedom and Solidarity (SaS—Sloboda a Solidarita), For the People (Za Ľudí), Network (Sieť), or Progressive Slovakia (PS—Progresívne Slovensko) have fallen into a bloc of parties on the centre-liberal party spectrum favouring social lifestyle issues. By contrast, other political parties such as the SNS, the Smer-SD, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO—Obyčajní ľudia
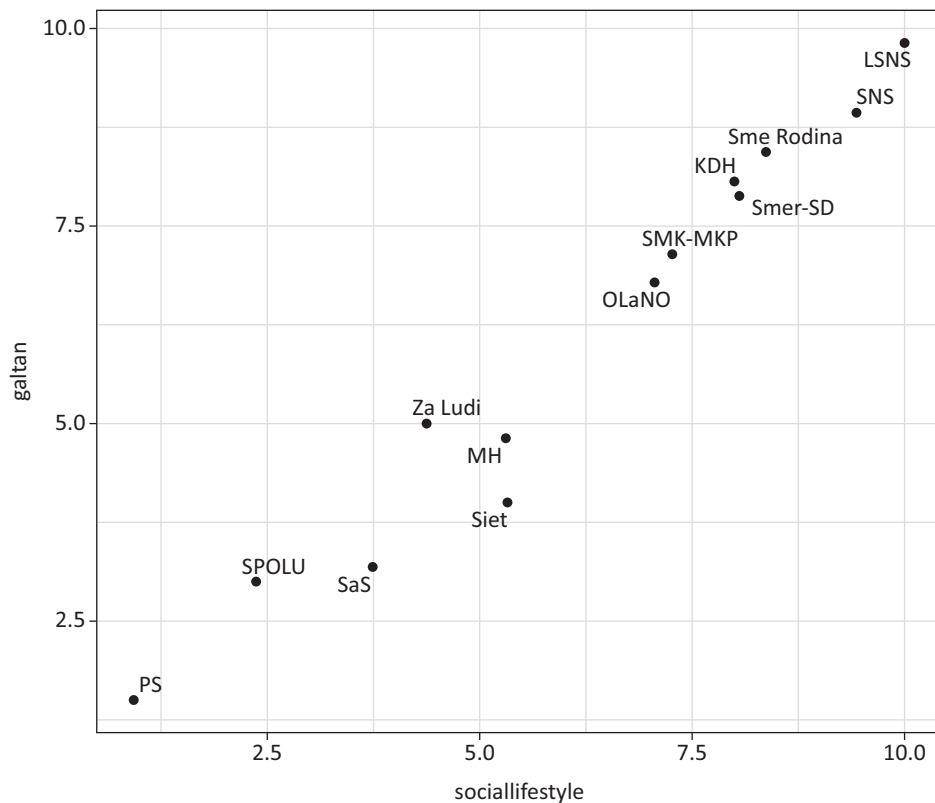
Figure 1. Positions of Slovak political parties (variables GAL-TAN, social lifestyle). Source: Based on data from Bakker (2020). Note: Appendix A in the Supplementary File includes acronyms for all political parties.

a nezávislé osobnosti), We Are Family (Sme Rodina), the People's Party of Our Slovakia (K-ĽSNS—Kotlebists), the Hungarian Community Party (SMK-MKP—Strana maďarskej komunity-Magyar Kőzősség Pártja), and the KDH have fallen into the opposite bloc of illiberal actors. All the illiberal parties, except for the non-parliamentary SMK-MKP, are included as objects in this analysis.

3. Methodology and Data

From a methodological point of view, this contribution can be categorised as a qualitative research study. That means it uses qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014; Schreier et al., 2019), which is widely used in political science for discourse- and speech act-oriented research (Hameleers, 2020; Janičatová & Mlejnková, 2021; Marek & Meislová, 2022; Meislová & Buckledee, 2021).

The data were obtained from the official website of the Slovak parliament (http://www.nrsr.sk) and transcripts of speeches were used accordingly. For the creation of the final corpus, a broadly utilised "gender" as an Anglicism was applied, even though the Slovak language also uses the other grammatical forms (gender— "rod"; e.g., gender equality—"*rodová rovnosť*"). Not only have politicians widely used this term, but the search function could also detect other related words in the language, such as "transgender." This effect provided the author with the possibility to not only focus on the

main narratives of gender but also on other related sub-narratives regarding transgender and the LGBTQ community, thereby bringing a more comprehensive depiction of how illiberal actors have dealt not only with gender issues but also LGBTQ issues. For this analysis, only statements delivered by illiberal parties were considered relevant; however, the final corpus also contains statements by the centre-liberal parliamentary parties SaS, Za ľudí, and Sieť. Findings regarding these parties are not included in our final analysis. The parties have generally delivered 25 from all 110 detected speeches and comments that predominantly aimed to diminish stereotypes about women, supported gender equality policy, and rhetorically defended sexual minorities.

For this study, a unique dataset was created. It consists of speeches and commentaries given during the fifth to the eighth parliamentary term of the NRSR (the Slovak parliament), from 2010 until the end of 2021: In other words, from Radičová through Fico II and III to Heger's government. Data gathering started in 2010—when the political system in CEE countries stepped into the so-called "hurricane season" (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2015)—and stopped at the end of 2021. The data found was manually transferred from the official NRSR website to the MAXQDA 2020 software for further computer-assisted analysis. In general, "CAQDAS query tools can…provide frequency counts, but the query tools are designed to highlight thematic and conceptual patterns across a number of different

documents'' (Franzosi et al., 2013, p. 3228). This study uses an inductive coding approach; as a coding unit, the author chose the "theme," which is focused on identifying a coherent idea, regardless of whether the statement is contained in one sentence or a paragraph or within many sentences or paragraphs. For a more detailed description of founded themes, see Appendix B in the Supplementary File.

To maximise the trustworthiness and reliability of this study (see Elo et al., 2014), after finalising all the stages of the coding process wherein the main narratives or, if necessary, sub-narratives, had been detected, an independent coder was invited to review all methodological steps as described above and verify the detected themes/sub-themes, as outlined in Appendix B of the Supplementary File. As a result of this verification, some unclear statements, including the etymon "gender," were moved to the newly established category "positive or not important."

Lastly, some crucial notes must be stressed regarding the limits of this analysis. First, it is necessary to bear in mind that this article presents an analysis of parliamentary discourse only, not the whole political discourse. The result of some political parties, such as the KDH, which has played a significant role in this topic at the societal level, is clearly biased, but the party was nonetheless present in parliamentary debates during 2012–2016. On the other hand, another political actor, the long-term governing Smer-SD, used the parliamentary platform to articulate policies in a very limited way. Instead, the party used its own press conferences and social media platforms to promote their agenda. For example, an analysis of Slovak parliamentary discourse focused on spreading a conspiracy theory about George Soros has the same pattern for Smer-SD (see Zvada, 2022). Likewise, the newcomer Sme Rodina was profiled in the same manner. To strengthen the outputs of this analysis, we have decided to complement the results with secondary sources discussing the broader political media discourse in Slovakia to deliver a more complex picture. Finally, when main anti-gender arguments are illustrated, they will be cited in relation to the final corpus—the cited sources will not be included in the references. All quotations have been translated by the author.

4. Findings

Based on the criteria and methods as outlined above, 85 of the 110 collected speeches and comments—making up three-quarters of the whole parliamentary discourse containing "gender" as a keyword and count-

ing 66,503 words—were given by the parties from the illiberal political spectre. At least two other important findings are displayed in Figure 2, namely that (a) the core of anti-gender discourse began in parliamentary debates after the 2016 parliamentary election and (b) the term "gender" was found to be slightly more prevalent in parliamentary comments than in the speeches themselves. The first finding is related to the fact that, after the 2016 parliamentary election, some populist parties such as Sme Rodina, the nationalist SNS, or the far-right K-ĽSNS entered the Slovak parliament and replaced traditionally moderate parties such as the Slovak Christian Democratic Union (SDKÚ—Slovenská demokraticko kresťanská únia) or the KDH. Regarding the second finding, the slight overrepresentation of parliamentary comments could be recognised as agreeing/disagreeing commentaries for given speeches. Those comments arose dominantly from the far-right K-ĽSNS party, which represented 33 of the total 47 parliamentary comments.

On the other hand, Figure 3 implies an asymmetric distribution of speeches and comments favouring the far-right K-ĽSNS, which were nominally given by 55 statements and occupied almost 65% of the anti-gender illiberal discourse; other actors gave a lower number of parliamentary speeches and comments, specifically as follows: OĽaNO (N = 11), SNS (N = 10), KDH (N = 5), Smer-SD (N = 2), and *Sme Rodina* (N = 2). Within the followed-up analysis, I follow the party-by-party approach, in ascending order, while the biased results of Smer-SD, KDH, and *Sme Rodina* will be considered in terms of their position within a broader political discourse, pertaining to their activities towards gender policy issues.

4.1. The Smer-SD

Despite the self-proclaimed social democratic orientation, the dominant political force in the Slovak political discourse, Smer-SD, stands in opposition to its declared values, such as the support of underprivileged minorities. The party's programmatic position is based on social issue politics rather than any defence and support of post-materialistic values. In fact, Slovak social democracy never adopted post-materialistic values. During the analysed period, only two parliamentary contributions on gender were made by the Smer-SD. The reference targeted a debate on the Istanbul Convention and later stressed the inconsistency of the rule of law and its terminology regarding the Slovak language, which could not distinguish between gender and sex. This was caused

Code System	6th parliamentary term (2012-2016)	7th parliamentary term (2016-2020)	8th parliamentary term (2020-2021)	SUM
Plenary Comments	1	30	16	47
Plenary Speech	8	20	10	38
Σ SUM	9	50	26	85

Figure 2. Share of illiberal parties' statements across parliamentary terms (speeches + comments in absolute numbers).
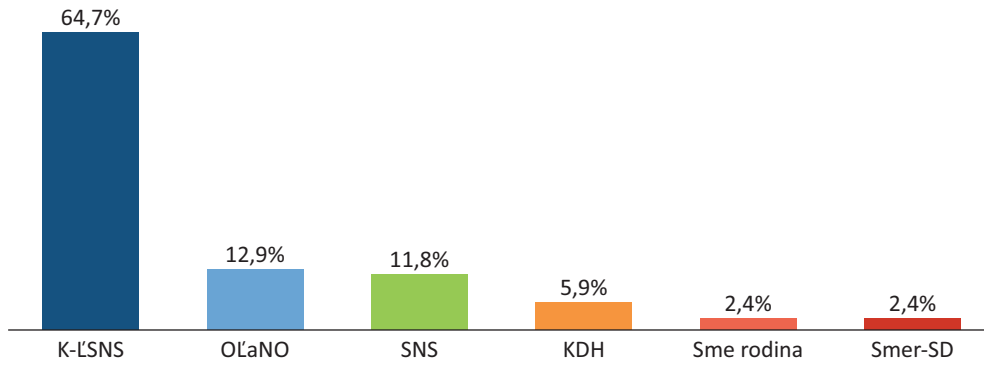
Figure 3. Share of statements across political parties (speeches + comments in percentages).

by the fact that many of the party members are educated as lawyers. Aside from this etymological problem, the Smer-SD deputies also acted against the Istanbul Convention, which they perceived as a threat to Slovak children because of the indoctrination of the educational system (see Figure 4).

In general, the Smer-SD managed gender issues according to the public polls rather than being based on a coherent agenda. However, the Smer-SD majority government established the Committee on the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Persons in late 2012. Considering that Smer-SD was the senior ruling party at the time, the party's position as expressed in the 2015 referendum was to support the vote; however, PM Fico stressed that this was no vital issue for Slovakia. In this case, there is a general understanding that Fico "exchanged his support for a ban on same-sex marriage for a proposed judicial reform" (Guasti, 2021, p. 201). The Smer-SD majority government also demonstrated this position when abandoning the National Action Plan on LGBTI Equality (known as ILGA Europe).

In this regard, the group of MPs led by Peter Pellegrini, who had split off from Smer-SD after the 2020 election, holds a more moderate and liberal position towards LGBTQ and gender issues. Since the Smer-SD split up, the party has changed the graphic visual and Pellegrini's party has become known as "Brussels' social democracy," while self-stylising itself in the position of so-called "rustic social democracy," defending the Slovak majority and being oriented strictly on economic and social problems, rather than post-material issues such as gender and environmentalism. It seems that the Smer-SD has never accepted the critique that loudly echoed after the Party European Socialist summit held in Prague in 2016, where the Smer-SD leader blamed social democrats from Western Europe for protecting LGBTQ and other minorities' rights rather than social and economic issues (Niňajová, 2016). Moreover, since its defeat in the 2020 parliamentary election, Smer-SD has continuously sharpened abusive rhetoric toward the LGBTQ community (Gehrerová, 2021).

Figure 4. Smer-SD parliamentary discourse on gender: Structure of code system and founded themes.

4.2. The Sme Rodina

The populist Sme Rodina, led by billionaire Boris Kollár, with its ultraconservative wing led by Milan Krajniak, who proclaimed to be the "last crusader," has also given only two statements in the analysed period. In comparison to the Smer-SD, however, the party entered the Slovak parliament after the 2016 parliamentary election (see Figure 5). The party perceived gender ideology mainly as a product of the West and the EU, or in other words, as a "product of neo-Marxists who support migration and do not protect human life when they support abortions" (P. Marček in 2018).

Besides utilizing anti-gender rhetoric to attack the EU, the party also stressed the narrative that portrays gender as a threat to the Christian and Catholic heritage of Slovakia. Even though the party was not active within the parliamentary discourse, the party's stances significantly affected the Slovak gender policy, especially after the 2020 parliamentary election when the party became a member of the four-party coalition government and Krajniak was appointed as Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. At first, Krajniak nominated an ultraconservative publicist, Roman Joch, as the director of the Research Institute for Labour and Family. Afterwards, the long-term director of the Department of Gender Equality, Oľga Pietruchová, left office, and she even warned that the Ministry under Krajniak's leadership was "changing expert opinions in favour of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, and it was trying to completely erase the concept of gender equality from the general discourse" (Štefúnová, 2020). She also refused an official government position and attempts of some deputies from the government coalition to restrict the abortion law and she fully supported the Ombudsman's annual report.

4.3. The KDH

The 2012 election was the last in which the Slovak Christian democrats succeeded and secured involvement in parliamentary debates. In their statements, the KDH stylised itself as a defender of traditional family values, and the party was in strong opposition to any progressive activity as the defender of the Christian ethos of the country. The KDH used anti-gender rhetoric that depicted gender as an ideology or philosophy (see Figure 6). Its parliamentary rhetoric clearly stated that the KDH utilised gender as a natural ideological opponent, as a product of the Western world, liberalism, and the EU. Using Kuby's metaphor, these Christian democrats understood gender ideology as "camouflaging the truth and euphemistically softening the unpleasant aspects of the culture of death" (M. Kvasnička in 2013). Branding gender as a product of neo-Marxism also appeared.

Even though the KDH's tradition goes back to 1993, the party could not communicate its conservative agenda at the parliamentary level after the 2016 parliamentary election. As a result, conservative voters left the party and decided to choose from other parties representing the traditional elements of politics. However, the most important aspect is that these Christian democrats, after defeats in the last elections, did not openly support happenings that represented a counterbalance to gay pride, for instance. There is no doubt that the KDH would leave Catholic values and principles in day-by-day politics. In general, though, the party abandoned broader political debates on gender and LGBTQ issues. After the new KDH executive *praesidium* was elected, the new party chairman, Milan Majer, stressed other priorities, such as economic and social policy rather than cultural issues. Consequently, the party moved to a more moderate and centrist position.

Code System	Sme Rodina (2016-2020)	SUM
Gender Philosophy		0
Genderism		0
Gender Agenda		0
Gender Ideology	1	1
Gender Philosophy/Agenda/Ideology/Genderism		0
Product of Neo-Marxism	1	1
Istanbul Convention		0
Product of Western/EU/Liberalism	1	1
Unscientific		0
Threat	1	1
God,Christianity,Freedom of Religion	1	1
Natural Order		0
Common Sense		0
Moral Order		0
Indoctrination of (Sexual) Education		0
Sovereignty		0
Civilization,Society,National Identity		0
Traditional Marriage,Family,Kids	1	1
Deviation		0
Totalitarianism		0
Transgender		0
Positive or Not important		0
∑ SUM	6	6

Figure 5. Sme Rodina parliamentary discourse on gender: Structure of code system and founded themes.

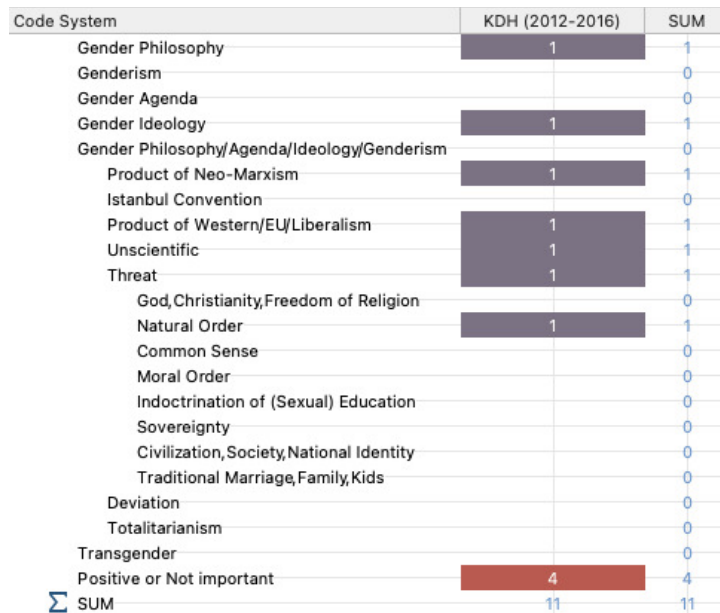| Code System	KDH (2012–2016)	SUM
Gender Philosophy	1	1
Genderism		0
Gender Agenda		0
Gender Ideology	1	1
Gender Philosophy/Agenda/Ideology/Genderism		0
Product of Neo-Marxism	1	1
Istanbul Convention		0
Product of Western/EU/Liberalism	1	1
Unscientific	1	1
Threat	1	1
God, Christianity, Freedom of Religion		0
Natural Order	1	1
Common Sense		0
Moral Order		0
Indoctrination of (Sexual) Education		0
Sovereignty		0
Civilization, Society, National Identity		0
Traditional Marriage, Family, Kids		0
Deviation		0
Totalitarianism		0
Transgender		0
Positive or Not important	4	4
Σ SUM	11	11

Figure 6. KDH parliamentary discourse on gender: Structure of code system and founded themes.

4.4. The OĽaNO

The OĽaNO provides an interesting case regarding gender policy issues. It is predominantly an anti-corruption party, and thanks to this position it has won the latest election, beating the dominant Smer-SD party (Lysek et al., 2020). The heterogeneous basis of the movement can be also seen in value issues. The party is internally split into less conservative or moderate and ultraconservative blocs.

From 11 statements that were given on gender between 2010–2021, a wide range of opinions and attitudes were detected (see Figure 7). For example,

Matovič, as the party leader, explicitly denies any rights for LGBTQ couples to raise children. By contrast, other MPs addressed supportive statements defending the LGBTQ community against hate speeches, spreading fear, and moral panic delivered by the Kotlebists during the debate on the Istanbul Convention. The internal split within the party was evident during the amendments of the Slovak Constitution in favour of traditional families, when only four out of 13 OĽaNO MPs voted for the changes. Regarding the discussion on the Istanbul Convention, one of the main figures of the ultraconservative wing of the OĽaNO movement, Richard Vašečka, summarizes the main argument against the convention
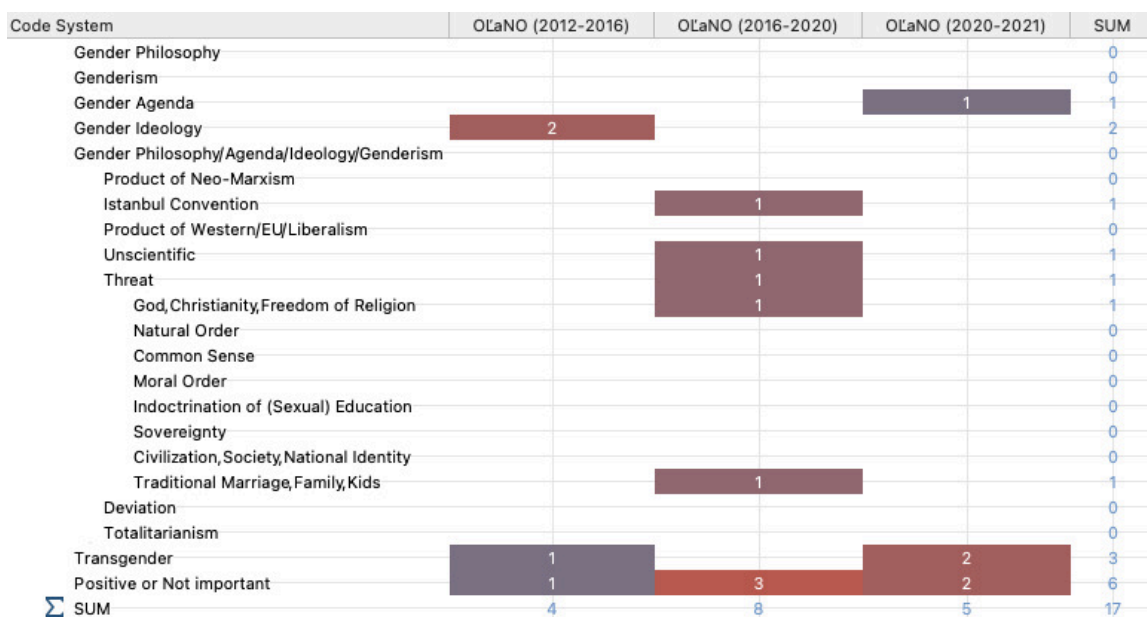

Code System	OĽaNO (2012–2016)	OĽaNO (2016–2020)	OĽaNO (2020–2021)	SUM
Gender Philosophy				0
Genderism				0
Gender Agenda			1	1
Gender Ideology	2			2
Gender Philosophy/Agenda/Ideology/Genderism				0
Product of Neo-Marxism				0
Istanbul Convention		1		1
Product of Western/EU/Liberalism				0
Unscientific		1		1
Threat		1		1
God, Christianity, Freedom of Religion		1		1
Natural Order				0
Common Sense				0
Moral Order				0
Indoctrination of (Sexual) Education				0
Sovereignty				0
Civilization, Society, National Identity				0
Traditional Marriage, Family, Kids		1		1
Deviation				0
Totalitarianism				0
Transgender	1		2	3
Positive or Not important	1	3	2	6
Σ SUM	4	8	5	17

Figure 7. OĽaNO parliamentary discourse on gender: Structure of code system and founded themes.

as follows: "Let us reject the unscientific gender ideology in our legislation because it is an experiment on children which threatens the rights of parents and also religious freedoms" (R. Vašečka in 2018).

4.5. The SNS

The position of the SNS was, as in the case of the KDH, determined by only one parliamentary term. Despite this fact, the SNS party delivered double the number of speeches that the KDH did. The centripetal position of the SNS on gender oscillated around the Istanbul Convention. The chosen rhetoric strategy was, however, different from the KDH because the overall argumentation, based on defending Christianity and the Catholic character of the Slovak Republic, was absent (see Figure 8).

The party mostly stressed Istanbul Convention as a valuable tool of gender ideology which would bring along indoctrination within the whole Slovak educational system. Therefore, the SNS also fought against the EU's control mechanism (GREVIO, the expert body) of monitoring gender equality and minority rights covered by the agreement and later described as weakening the nation-state and sovereignty in favour of the EU. Slovak nationalists highlight the civilisational dimension when outlining gender as a threat to the Slovak nation due to the moral decline of the liberal West and the EU. The MPs of SNS also instrumentalised and used a transnational argument, perceiving gender as a "neoliberal truth" (A. Hrnko in 2019). The party's position within the Slovak parliamentary discourse has rather defended national aspects—not the religious ones threatened by "gender ideology," but the protection of the traditional family and children from indoctrination through education were detected. The SNS used anti-gender rhetoric

against the Istanbul Convention and as a mobilisation tool to strengthen its Eurosceptic position. This position is not surprising especially considering the foreign policy orientation of the SNS regarding Russia and bearing in mind political inspiration from other illiberal and populist politicians across Europe, such as Orbán and Salvini, or Putin's Russia.

4.6. The K-ĽSNS

The most comprehensive anti-gender rhetoric was utilised by the far-right party, the K-ĽSNS, which accounted for 55 out of the 85 illiberal speeches analysed. The party ideology of K-ĽSNS was based on ethno-nationalist and exclusionist principles of nativism (Mudde, 2007). In 2019, the party had to face the threat of being dissolved because of its anti-system and anti-democratic policy approach. This far-right actor has represented a whole spectrum of anti-gender arguments, and at least three important implications were derived from the analysed parliamentary debates. First, the K-ĽSNS used anti-gender rhetoric to promote anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and Eurosceptic ideologies. The party has actively denied Popper's "open society," which the Slovak K-ĽSNS has understood as a:

> Society in which foreign minorities are often to have greater rights than the domestic majority. A society ruled by feminism and gender ideology, already despising our children and disintegrating families. A society in which drugs and prostitution are legalised. Moreover, finally, a society that supports the so-called LGBTQ community, i.e., the community of sexual deviations. It is an amoral, divided society. (R. Schlosár in 2016)
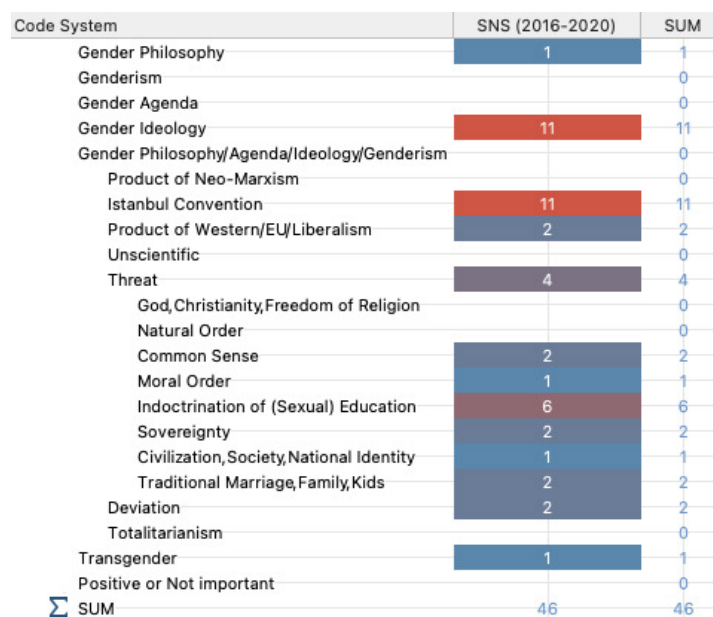
Code System	SNS (2016–2020)	SUM
Gender Philosophy	1	1
Genderism		0
Gender Agenda		0
Gender Ideology	11	11
Gender Philosophy/Agenda/Ideology/Genderism		0
Product of Neo-Marxism		0
Istanbul Convention	11	11
Product of Western/EU/Liberalism	2	2
Unscientific		0
Threat	4	4
God, Christianity, Freedom of Religion		0
Natural Order		0
Common Sense	2	2
Moral Order	1	1
Indoctrination of (Sexual) Education	6	6
Sovereignty	2	2
Civilization, Society, National Identity	1	1
Traditional Marriage, Family, Kids	2	2
Deviation	2	2
Totalitarianism		0
Transgender	1	1
Positive or Not important		0
Σ SUM	46	46

Figure 8. SNS parliamentary discourse on gender: Structure of code system and founded themes.

The K-ĽSNS' rhetoric contains gender ideology spreading from the "Brussels Babylon tower" organised and led by the "neo-Marxist Zionists group" (S. Mizík in 2016). As shown in Figure 9, the K-ĽSNS introduced a far more universally spread argument based on threatening the Western civilisation whilst simultaneously stressing both the universality of Christianity and the importance of protecting Slovak Catholicism when stating: "This is a direct attack on the essence of the whole European civilisation on the essence of our culture, nations, faith, and simply everything" (M. Mazurek in 2019). Second, the K-ĽSNS fully opted for ultraconservative Catholic rhetoric related to protecting traditional families, marriages, and the morals of raising future generations. While the SNS criticised the Istanbul Convention due to the assumed loss of Slovakia's sovereignty because of control mechanisms, the K-ĽSNS stressed the need not only to protect the educational system against any gender indoctrination as seen in the Istanbul Convention but also to protect "young children from various forms of deviance promotion" (M. Mazurek in 2021). Thirdly, just as K-ĽSNS used xenophobia in previous cases regarding rhetoric on Jews, Romani, or Muslims (Voda et al., 2021; Zvada, 2018), the party used the most abusive and heterosexist language in its speeches regarding gender topics. In this manner, the party labels gender ideology, transgender, and the LGBTQ community as synonymous with deviance. For this party, the Pride festival events are mere "carnivals of mentally disturbed exhibitionists" (M. Uhrík in 2017). In other words, and from a broader perspective:

> I want to tell everyone that imposing gender ideology is a perversion and a crime. Moreover, those who have this gender ideology and the LGBTQ, and I do not know all these similar ideologies, that promote it

are perverted, they are crazy, and they are criminals. (N. Grausová in 2019)

In this case, the far-right MPs argued while using a rationalist and conservative worldview because a "rationally conservative person cannot identify with gender ideology" (M. Mazurek in 2019).

Finally, even though gender studies as a field of social sciences does not exist in Slovakia, "inspired" by the Hungarian case (see Petö, 2021), the Slovak far-right, alongside the SNS and KDH, has also attacked it as an "unscientific discipline" (M. Mazurek in 2019) and has presented it as a redundant field of study that would be a waste of time and money that "could have been spent more meaningfully" (S. Drobný in 2019).

5. Conclusion

The qualitative content analysis of this study, as provided by CAQDAS, analysed the anti-gender parliamentary discourse, and it has identified several significant findings. From the total of 110 detected parliamentary speeches containing "gender" as the keyword, 85 of them were given by the illiberal political parties. These statements were delivered mainly after the 2016 parliamentary election when some populist or far-right forces entered the Slovak parliament and replaced moderate and traditional parties. Most importantly, this article finds that the occurrence and range of anti-gender narratives of illiberal parties are diverse. Although some previous studies claim that the Slovak parties have adopted the same attitude towards the idea of gender ideology (Ďurinová, 2015), the results of this study suggest that the opposite is the case, and thus the previous observations offered insufficient explanations.

Code System	K-ĽSNS (2016-2020)	K-ĽSNS (2020-2021)	SUM
Gender Philosophy	1		1
Genderism	2	6	8
Gender Agenda	4	5	9
Gender Ideology	32	5	37
Gender Philosophy/Agenda/Ideology/Genderism			0
Product of Neo-Marxism	4	3	7
Istanbul Convention	15	2	17
Product of Western/EU/Liberalism	8	4	12
Unscientific	3	2	5
Threat	13	15	28
God, Christianity, Freedom of Religion	3	1	4
Natural Order	2	1	3
Common Sense		2	2
Moral Order		4	4
Indoctrination of (Sexual) Education	2	8	10
Sovereignty		1	1
Civilization, Society, National Identity	5	6	11
Traditional Marriage, Family, Kids	9	19	28
Deviation	2	8	10
Totalitarianism	2		2
Transgender	12	10	22
Positive or Not important	4		4
Σ SUM	123	102	225

Figure 9. K-ĽSNS discourse on gender: Structure of code system and founded themes.

It is evident from this article, and despite the limits of a corpus based only on parliamentary speeches and comments, that the parties' anti-gender rhetoric and anti-gender arguments significantly varied according to their ideological background. Smer-SD, which is a self-claimed Slovak social democratic party, has neglected gender policy issues and only stressed the legal aspects proposed in the Istanbul Convention when contributing to the parliamentary debate. On the other hand, the populist Sme Rodina has primarily articulated gender as a threat to Slovak Catholics. The OĽaNO, the winner of the latest parliamentary election, has represented an internally split political party, and its position on gender policy has varied from ultraconservative to moderate and centrist positions. The KDH, a traditional political party representing Christian values and principles, predominantly used a narrative depicting gender as a threat to traditional families and traditional marriages. However, the party also stressed the ideological aspect of seeing gender as a product of decadent western liberalism from which conservatism must be protected. The national party, SNS, tended to more nationalistic and Eurosceptic rhetoric in their speeches when arguing that future sovereignty would be lost in favour of the EU if the Istanbul Convention was ratified. Finally, the far-right K-ĽSNS has used a wide range of arguments as mentioned above. The Kotlebists were situated, especially when the KDH did not enter the parliament after the 2016 election, as a protector of traditional values, families, and marriages and as guardians of western civilisation, threatened by gender ideology. The K-ĽSNS also utilised the most abusive and heterosexist language towards transgender people and other members of the LGBTQ community (marking them as "deviant" or comparing these people to zoophiles or paedophiles) in their speeches. This is the same hate-speech strategy that the far-right party used against the Roma people, Muslims, and Jews.

As it seems, anti-gender rhetoric will not be overcome soon. Even though Igor Matovič, the OĽaNO leader, had proclaimed the status quo on cultural issues due to the process of forming a new government after the 2020 parliamentary election, an ultraconservative wing from within the OĽaNO, led by Anna Záborská, recently initiated a bill restricting access to abortion (Kafkadesk.org, 2021). Moreover, the K-ĽSNS deputies and a newly established far-right party called Republika initiated other constitutional changes in favour of the concept of the traditional family, openly inspired by Orbán's laws in Hungary. They have also started a constitutional change suggesting that gender identities are immutable and strictly determined at birth (M. Beluský in 2021). Even though Buštíková and Guasti (2017) claimed that Slovakia is rather illiberal-swerving than illiberal-turning, anti-gender rhetoric has settled in the broader Slovak political discourse. It could be a significant warning. This "symbolic glue," as Grzebalska and Petö (2018) have shown, has been used by the illiberal parties in Poland and Hungary to rise to power by countering the gender equality paradigm. In the Slovak case, it is disturbing that two of the three points of the "gendered modus operandi of illiberal transformation" (Grzebalska & Petö, 2018) can be observed in Slovak discourse. If Slovak society accepts anti-gender rhetoric and the exclusion of underprivileged groups, the "seductive lure" of authoritarianism, the so-called "Orbanization" (see Applebaum, 2020; Tharoor, 2022), or what political theorists call disruptive illiberalism should be closer than expected.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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