Forum of Foreign Languages, Politology and International Relations
Vol. 18, No. 1-2 (2026)
ISSN: 2454-0145 (online), 2644-6464 (print)

European Elections 2024 as an Indicator of the Radicalization of Political Competition and Challenges for Militant Democracy

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Abstract
The analysis of the 2024 European Parliament election results in Slovakia highlights the deepening polarization and radicalization of the domestic political scene. Although the pro-European Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko – PS) movement emerged as the formal winner, the overall distribution of power and the success of parties such as Smer-SD and Republika indicate the strong influence of nationalist and Eurosceptic narratives. Through the lens of militant democracy, the text critically evaluates the unsuccessful strategy of the Hlas-SD party, which attempted to counter radicals by imitating their rhetoric, ultimately leading to a loss of its own identity. These election results serve not only as a distribution of mandates but primarily as an indicator of the stability of democratic institutions and the ability of political actors to confront populism without contributing to the normalization of extreme positions in future political contests.
Keywords: *militant democracy, election, polarization, political party, radicalization*

In the elections to the European Parliament in Slovakia (8 June 2024), 15 seats were allocated to candidates from the following political parties and movements: Progresívne Slovensko (PS), Smer-SD, Republika, Hlas-SD, and KDH, as only these political entities surpassed the legally required threshold for entering the European Parliament. Based on the election results, Progresívne Slovensko was declared the winner (27.81% – 6 seats). The second strongest political party was Smer-SD (24.76% – 4 seats), followed by the Republika movement (12.53% – 2 seats), Hlas-SD (7.18% – 1 seat), and KDH (7.14% – 1 seat) (European Parliament, 2024).

The analysis of the results of the 2024 European Parliament elections in Slovakia provides an interesting analytical space for interpreting broader trends in Slovak politics, particularly in the context of militant democracy and the gradual radicalization of political competition. The concept of militant democracy, which is based on the idea of defending the democratic system against actors who challenge its fundamental values, highlights the need to observe not only formal electoral outcomes but also the discursive and strategic shifts of political actors. In this context, European elections do not merely represent a contest for mandates in a supranational institution, but also serve as an indicator of how the ideological configuration of political forces is evolving, how political communication is becoming radicalized, and what strategies

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individual political actors employ in response to the growing influence of radical and populist narratives.

From this perspective, it is important to ask what significance the 2024 European elections held for Slovak politics and what message they convey regarding the development of the democratic system. This is not only a question of the electoral success of individual parties, but also of broader political signals concerning the stability of democratic institutions, the degree of radicalization of public discourse, and the capacity of democratic actors to respond to the challenges associated with the rise of radical political forces.

1. Victory of PS as an Indicator of Plural Political Competition under Conditions of Radicalization

From the perspective of militant democracy, the victory of the Progresívne Slovensko movement cannot be interpreted as unequivocal evidence of the dominance of pro-European liberal progressivism in Slovak society. Rather, it reflects a specific configuration of political competition in which pro-European democratic forces confront actors employing radicalizing or Eurosceptic discourses. The victory of PS can be explained by a combination of several factors, most notably the nature of its campaign, its methods of voter mobilization, and its ability to effectively communicate values associated with democratic stability and European integration.

In the 2024 European elections, PS employed a combination of pro-European, liberal, and environmentally oriented campaigning, primarily targeting younger and more progressively oriented voters, especially in urban areas. Their strategy was based on a relatively clearly defined segmentation of the electorate and on presenting the movement as a modern political actor supporting the strengthening of European integration, the protection of democratic values, and the principles of the rule of law. Their programmatic communication also included issues such as environmental policy—particularly the fight against climate change—support for equal rights for minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, modernization of the education system with an emphasis on innovation and technological development, as well as topics related to digital services, cybersecurity, and the protection of democratic institutions.

From the perspective of militant democracy, it is also important that PS emphasized in its campaign the need to protect the democratic system from authoritarian tendencies. In the context of growing Euroscepticism and nationalist discourses in European politics, PS sought to present itself as a political actor capable of ensuring stability and continuity in Slovakia' s pro-European orientation. Its communication strategy combined modern digital tools with traditional forms of political mobilization. The movement effectively utilized social media, which became one of the main channels for mobilizing younger voters, while also continuing to organize public events and face-to-face meetings with citizens.

An important mobilizing element of the campaign was the slogan "We will keep Slovakia in Europe," which emphasized the protective role of PS in maintaining the country' s European

orientation. In the context of militant democracy, this type of communication can be interpreted as a form of normative voter mobilization in favor of democratic and pro-European values, responding to the growing presence of radical and Eurosceptic narratives in the political space. The use of modern communication strategies, social media, and direct interaction with citizens thus created a strong foundation for PS' s electoral success and at the same time suggested that this political actor can remain relevant even in a context where issues related to the European Union are increasingly becoming subjects of polarized political debate.

PS thus conducted a conventional, digitally oriented, positive, mobilizing, and at the same time segmented electoral campaign. Despite its electoral victory, however, a broader analysis of the European election results in Slovakia suggests that the interpretation of this success must be approached with caution. The political party Smer-SD finished in second place and, together with the Republika movement and the party Hlas-SD, represents a significant part of the political spectrum that employs different discursive strategies and, to varying degrees, works with Eurosceptic or nationally oriented narratives.

The distribution of political forces following the European elections also points to a certain fragmentation of the conservative electorate. Voters of Hlas-SD and Smer-SD often share a similar social profile and political preferences, with a portion of them shifting toward Smer-SD during the campaign. This shift became even more pronounced after the assassination attempt on Prime Minister R. Fico, which mobilized part of the electorate toward the political actor perceived as the main representative of this political line.

Another factor influencing the election results was the strategy of Hlas-SD, which in some respects attempted to imitate the communication style of the Republika movement. However, this approach led to a partial loss of the party' s identity, as its voters traditionally expect a more moderate and socially oriented political program rather than the radicalized discourse typical of far-right actors. As a result, it can be argued that the division of votes among these political entities weakened their overall electoral potential.

Had such fragmentation of support among these parties not occurred, it is likely that Smer-SD could have won the elections. For this reason, the victory of PS cannot be interpreted as clear evidence of the dominance of progressive-liberal attitudes in Slovak society. Rather, it reflects a specific dynamic of political competition in which various ideological currents intersect, including those that rely on radicalized or Eurosceptic narratives.

In this context, the political party Smer-SD interpreted the election results as follows: "We sent a clear signal from Slovakia to Brussels, as the majority was won by representatives of national and conservative political forces. Citizens clearly demanded a change in EU policy, as they largely rejected the EU' s approach to the war in Ukraine, the sending of weapons, and the progressive ideology of the Green Deal, as well as the denial of traditional values—all this with record voter turnout." (Smer hodnotí⋯, 2024).

Although PS formally won the European elections, from the perspective of broader political dynamics, a strong position can also be attributed to the second most successful actor, Smer-

SD, particularly in the context of potential cooperation with political actors such as Hlas-SD and Republika.

These parties represent a segment of the political space that, under certain conditions, may form an alternative power configuration at the national level.

From the perspective of militant democracy, the 2024 European elections thus sent an important signal for Slovak national politics. They suggest that in future parliamentary elections, one cannot rule out a scenario in which a political actor such as PS might achieve electoral success, yet—without a sufficiently strong coalition partner—may not be able to effectively exercise political power. At the same time, this situation highlights the importance of coalition strategies and the growing complexity of political competition in an environment where democratic and radicalized political discourses increasingly intersect.

2. Genuine Radicals Cannot Be Defeated by Imitation: Strategic Radicalization and the Loss of Identity of Hlas-SD

The result of the political party Hlas-SD in the 2024 European elections (7.18% of the vote and one seat) represents, from an analytical perspective, a significant example of the failure of a strategy that can be described in contemporary political science as the strategic adaptation of a mainstream party to a radicalized discourse. From the perspective of militant democracy, this is a particularly important phenomenon, as it illustrates how democratic political actors, in attempting to respond to the growing influence of radical actors, may unintentionally contribute to the normalization of radical narratives and the weakening of their own ideological identity.

The electoral outcome of Hlas-SD was closely linked to the nature of its campaign, which in many respects appeared indistinct and lacked a clearly defined authentic message. Instead of relying on traditional themes associated with social policy and stability—which form the core expectations of its voter base—the party largely shifted toward topics and rhetoric typical of more radical political actors, such as Republika or SNS. This shift can be interpreted as an attempt to compete electorally with the radical right through imitation of its discourse, a strategy often associated in the literature with the concept of the so-called mainstreaming of the far right (Mudde, 2019; Moffitt, 2016).

In its campaign, Hlas-SD focused on controversial and highly polarizing issues such as migration, Euroscepticism, and cultural-ethical questions. The visual and substantive elements of the campaign—for example, the portrayal of migrants, discussions about "toilets for four genders," or narratives about the loss of property as a consequence of European Union policies—represented typical features of a radicalized political discourse based on the mobilization of fear and cultural insecurity. While such communication strategies may, in the short term, appeal to a segment of voters inclined toward the radical right, in the case of Hlas-SD they did not lead to a convincing electoral outcome.

From the perspective of theories of political radicalization, this failure can be explained by the fact that Hlas-SD was unable to present itself as a credible bearer of Eurosceptic or more radical messaging. Unlike the Republika movement, which has long maintained a consistently defined anti-establishment and anti-European identity, Hlas-SD' s shift toward these themes appeared strategically instrumental and ideologically inconsistent. In the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as the "credibility gap," meaning the discrepancy between a declared political position and its perceived authenticity (Rooduijn et al., 2017).

From the perspective of militant democracy, this development is problematic for two reasons. First, it contributes to the blurring of boundaries between democratic and radicalized discourse, which may facilitate the legitimization of more extreme political positions within the mainstream. Second, such a strategy weakens the ability of democratic actors to function as stabilizing elements within the political system, as they lose their programmatic identity and credibility.

In contrast, the Republika movement was able to present its anti-European and radical rhetoric as an integral part of its political identity, thereby appearing more consistent and credible to voters. This contrast highlights an important aspect of political competition under conditions of radicalization: voters tend to prefer the "original" over the "copy," especially when it comes to ideologically distinct positions (Abou-Chadi, Krause, 2020).

Another important factor influencing the result of Hlas-SD was the party' s fatigue following the demanding presidential elections. Although these elections resulted in success with the election of P. Pellegrini, they also significantly exhausted the party' s organizational, personnel, and financial resources. In the context of political mobilization theory, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a decline in mobilization potential following a peak electoral event, which subsequently manifested in lower voter engagement in less salient elections, such as those to the European Parliament (Reif, Schmitt, 1980).

Domestic political developments also played a significant role in the case of the extra-parliamentary Republika movement, which managed to use the European elections as an opportunity to restore its political relevance. The deployment of well-known political figures and a consistent Eurosceptic rhetoric enabled this actor to effectively mobilize voters who perceive the European Union as a threat to national sovereignty.

On the other hand, a certain degree of political saturation was evident among Hlas-SD voters. Following P. Pellegrini' s success in the presidential elections, some voters lost motivation to participate in another electoral campaign, which they perceived as less significant. This phenomenon can also be interpreted within the framework of the "second-order elections" theory, according to which voters attribute less importance to European elections than to national ones, leading to lower turnout and different voting behavior (Reif, Schmitt, 1980).

A significant factor in the weakening of Hlas-SD was also the absence of its dominant leader, P. Pellegrini, who, after being elected president, ceased to be an active part of party politics. Political parties that are highly personalized and dependent on a charismatic leader often face

difficulties in maintaining voter support after that leader' s departure. In the case of Hlas-SD, it became evident that the party was unable to effectively replace Pellegrini' s leadership role or his mobilization potential.

3. The Potential Return of Republika: Radicalization of Political Discourse and Challenges for Militant Democracy

From the perspective of militant democracy, this development points to a broader problem of the institutional and personnel weakness of democratic political actors, who, under conditions of increasing radicalization, are unable to sufficiently articulate a convincing alternative to radical narratives. The inability to build stable leadership structures and a consistent ideological identity may lead to the gradual weakening of the democratic political space and the strengthening of radical actors.

Overall, the case of Hlas-SD in the 2024 European elections illustrates the limits of a strategy that seeks to confront the radicalization of political competition using its own tools. Instead of weakening radical actors, such an approach may contribute to their legitimization while simultaneously undermining the credibility of mainstream political parties. In the context of militant democracy, the defense of the democratic system therefore requires not only institutional mechanisms, but also consistent, value-based political communication capable of addressing radicalization without reproducing it.

The result of the Republika movement in the 2024 European elections represents, in terms of the development of Slovak politics, a significant indicator of the growing potential of radical political actors. Within the framework of militant democracy theory, this development can be interpreted as part of a broader process of the radicalization of political competition, in which discourses questioning liberal-democratic values, European integration, and the pluralistic character of society increasingly enter the public sphere.

In its political communication, Republika has positioned itself as an actor emphasizing the protection of national values, sovereignty, and traditional identity. Through its campaign, it sought to appeal to voters dissatisfied with the current direction of the country and who perceive political and social changes as a threat to stable social and cultural frameworks. Such a strategy is typical of populist and radical right movements, which mobilize voters through a combination of anti-establishment rhetoric, nationalism, and criticism of supranational political structures such as the European Union (Mudde, 2007; Norris, Inglehart, 2019).

From an ideological perspective, Republika presents European integration and liberal values as factors that weaken national sovereignty and traditional social norms. This type of argumentation can be understood as part of a broader discursive framework of the radical right, which emphasizes the need to protect "the people" from perceived external threats—whether migration, globalization, or cultural liberalization (Mudde, 2007). In this context, Republika seeks to present itself as an alternative to established political parties, which are portrayed as part of a detached political elite.

The movement' s campaign was built on a strong emphasis on conservative values, appeals to national identity, and the use of emotionally charged political messaging. In its programmatic statements, the movement declared: "The Republika movement is against war, sanctions, the dominance of Brussels, the acceptance of illegal migrants, the promotion of harmful LGBTI ideology, and the so-called Green Deal policies that threaten our agriculture, rural areas, and economy as a whole" (Eurovoľby 2024: Hnutie Republika..., 2024, p. 2).

Such statements represent a typical example of political communication based on social polarization and the construction of a conflict line between "the people" and "the elites," which is one of the core elements of populist ideology (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2017). From the perspective of militant democracy, however, it is important to monitor not only the content of such narratives but also their potential to gradually normalize more radical political positions within the broader political discourse.

Republika' s campaign also relied on simple and memorable slogans with strong symbolic appeal. One example was the slogan "there are only two genders," which reflects a traditional conservative stance on gender identity while simultaneously rejecting contemporary debates on gender diversity. This type of communication can be interpreted as a form of cultural-political mobilization aimed at appealing to voters through a perceived threat to traditional values.

An important component of the campaign was also the presence of controversial political figures, such as M. Mazurek, whose communication is characterized by strongly nationalist and radical rhetoric emphasizing the protection of national identity and state security. His messaging frequently employs populist strategies based on constructing threats from migrants, minorities, or supranational political structures.

Such strategies are typical of the radical right, which seeks to mobilize voters through simple narratives and strong emotional appeals. However, a key problem remains that these narratives often lack concrete and realistic policy solutions. Political communication is thus reduced to a series of symbolic conflicts that may mobilize segments of the electorate but simultaneously lower the quality of public political discourse.

The populist nature of Republika' s campaign was also evident in promises to improve citizens' living standards. These promises, however, were not accompanied by concrete policy proposals or realistic implementation plans. This approach can be interpreted as part of a broader populist strategy that prioritizes simple solutions to complex problems while avoiding detailed programmatic commitments (Moffitt, 2016).

From the perspective of militant democracy, this type of political mobilization represents a significant challenge. Radical political actors often use democratic mechanisms—including elections—to gain political legitimacy, while simultaneously questioning the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. The concept of militant democracy therefore emphasizes the need for active protection of democratic institutions from actors who may seek to weaken or exploit them in the future (Loewenstein, 1937; Sajó, 2004).

In this context, it is also relevant to compare Republika' s performance in the 2024 European elections with its result in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia. While Smer-SD won those elections, a total of seven political parties entered parliament, with Republika narrowly missing the threshold with 4.75% of the vote. The party' s leader, M. Uhrík, attributed this failure partly to strategic voting, as some supporters shifted to SNS or Smer-SD in order to prevent a victory by PS (Mihale, 2024).

However, Republika' s performance in the 2024 European elections suggests that the movement has maintained a stable level of electoral support and may be strengthening its position within the Slovak political landscape. From the perspective of political dynamics, this may indicate its potential return as a relevant political actor at the national level.

For militant democracy, this development raises an important analytical question. On the one hand, pluralistic political competition is a fundamental principle of democracy. On the other hand, the growing influence of radical political actors may gradually transform the nature of political discourse and shift the boundaries of acceptable political debate toward more radical and polarizing positions.

Republika' s result can therefore be interpreted as an indicator of a broader trend observable across Europe—the gradual strengthening of the radical right in the context of increasing social polarization, cultural conflicts, and declining trust in traditional political elites (Norris, Inglehart, 2019).

Conclusion

The results of the 2024 European Parliament elections in Slovakia provide an important analytical insight into the current state of political competition and highlight broader processes of the radicalization of political discourse, which are present not only in Slovakia but also in many other European democracies. From the perspective of militant democracy, these elections represent not merely a contest for representation in a supranational institution, but also a significant indicator of how different political narratives—from pro-European and liberal-democratic to radical, populist, and Eurosceptic—are formed and promoted within a democratic system.

Although the formal victory of Progresívne Slovensko suggests the existence of a strong pro-European political segment, the overall results also demonstrate that the Slovak political scene remains highly fragmented and ideologically polarized. Significant support for parties employing nationally oriented or Eurosceptic narratives indicates the continued presence of political currents critical of the liberal-democratic trajectory of the European Union. Therefore, the victory of PS cannot be interpreted as clear evidence of the dominance of progressive liberalism in Slovak society, but rather as a product of a specific configuration of political competition and voter mobilization.

An important aspect of the 2024 elections is also the evolution of political strategies in an environment of increasing radicalization. The case of Hlas-SD highlights the limits of a strategy that seeks to respond to the rise of radical actors by imitating their communication and thematic frameworks. Such an approach may weaken the programmatic identity of mainstream parties while simultaneously contributing to the normalization of radical narratives. Political science research consistently shows that voters tend to prefer ideologically consistent actors over those who adopt radical themes only strategically or opportunistically (Mudde, 2019; Abou-Chadi, Krause, 2020).

At the same time, the performance of Republika indicates that the radical right in Slovakia is capable of maintaining stable electoral support and potentially increasing its political relevance. Its communication is based on populist mobilization emphasizing the conflict between "ordinary people" and political elites, combined with nationalist and Eurosceptic narratives. Such strategies are characteristic of radical right actors across Europe and pose a significant challenge to the stability of liberal-democratic systems (Norris, Inglehart, 2019).

In the context of militant democracy, the 2024 European elections should therefore be understood as part of a broader transformation of political competition, in which the boundaries of acceptable political discourse are shifting and the importance of identity-based and cultural conflicts is increasing. The concept of militant democracy underscores the need to balance pluralism with the protection of democratic values (Loewenstein, 1937; Sajó, 2004).

The Slovak case also demonstrates that the defense of democracy does not rely solely on legal or institutional mechanisms, but also on the quality of political competition and the ability of democratic actors to articulate a compelling vision of societal development. The stability of a democratic system depends not only on formal rules, but also on the extent to which political actors respect democratic norms and engage in political discourse without contributing to excessive polarization and radicalization.

The 2024 European elections thus serve as an important signal for Slovak national politics. They suggest that future political competition will increasingly be shaped by the tension between pro-European democratic forces and actors employing radicalized or populist narratives. The coming years will show to what extent democratic actors are capable of responding to these challenges in a way that strengthens the resilience of the democratic system while preserving its pluralistic character.

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