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Are Slovaks a nation of cowards? Robert Fico's politics of memory and the transformation of Slovak foreign policy towards Russia and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Robert Fico's politics of memory have shaped Slovak policy towards Russia and Ukraine after the 2022 invasion, and what this implies for liberal nationalism in Slovakia. It argues that Fico's success rests on a selective interpretation of national history, through which he portrays Russia as a historical ally, downplays Slovak complicity in Nazi and communist rule, and frames the war in Ukraine primarily in socio-economic rather than normative terms. In contrast, Slovak liberals have often treated nationhood and national history with suspicion, contrasting narratives about a "cowardly" nation with an uncritical alignment of Slovak interests with those of the European Union, leaving the politics of memory to the populists. Drawing on debates about the meaning of the Slovak National Uprising and dissident reflections on cowardice and responsibility, the article shows how the politics of memory structures domestic contestation over relations with Brussels, Kyiv, and Moscow. The article engages with liberal theories of nationalism to suggest that the pro-European camp in Slovakia requires a more positive national narrative that connects liberal-democratic commitments with Slovak historical experience. It concludes by proposing a liberal-nationalist reframing that could help Slovak opposition leaders reclaim debates on history and national interest.

KEYWORDS

Politics of history; liberal nationalism; Robert Fico; war in Ukraine; Slovakia

History matters. To make sense of their current predicament, people recall the decisive turns in their nation's history. Political leaders seeking popular support for their current agendas attempt to shape debates about history to legitimize their actions. This dynamic gains additional urgency in times of major political upheavals and geopolitical realignments, such as those that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe underwent over the last few decades. From the demise of communism in 1989, the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the entry into the European Union in 2004, and the resurgence of Russian imperialism in 2014 and 2022, Slovakia faced

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major challenges that forced the nation to consider its place in Europe and the wider world. The focus of this article is on the transformation of Slovak foreign policy towards Russia and Ukraine in the aftermath of the full-blown invasion in February 2022, but the case exemplifies similar domestic political developments across Europe. Presenting an existential challenge not just to Ukraine, but to all nations of Europe and the existing security architecture, the war has brought into stark relief existing political divisions, galvanizing both proponents and opponents of European integration. Slovakia can thus serve as a synecdoche, that is "a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole" (Majone 2016, 261), by highlighting political contestations that are bound to shape not merely the future of the country, but the entire continent.

Contemporary Slovak politics thus both reflects and shapes divisions in Europe in relation to Russia and Ukraine (see *Kazharski and Monsportova*'s contribution to this Forum). "Ukraine's freedom is Europe's freedom," reiterated the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in her State of the Union address in September 2025 (European Commission 2025). However inspirational von der Leyen's speech was, it could not capture diverging opinions across Europe. While the key EU actors, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, have been staunchly supportive towards Ukraine (e.g. Scicluna 2025), there have been growing conflicts within and between EU member states about the nature and the extent of that support. Conflicts within Slovak society are thus all too European. While the country was led by a centrist coalition government at the beginning of the full-blown Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Slovakia strongly supported the EU's official position. This seemed consistent with its historic experience. After all, both Czechs and Slovaks suffered under Soviet tutelage, with the memory of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 very much alive in both successor states. Yet, in November 2023, the former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico won elections partly by mobilizing voters *opposed* to the Western support of Ukraine. This position, too, was justified by historical memory. Instead of recalling the trauma of 1968, however, Fico proudly invoked the legacy of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, followed by the Soviet liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazism. "Freedom came to Slovakia from the East" (TASR 2025), claimed Fico, arguing that the nation owes its gratitude to Russia – an assertion he reiterated in meetings with Putin adjacent to the commemorations of the end of the Second World War in May 2025 in Moscow and September 2025 in Beijing.

Liberal opposition in Slovakia has struggled to find an adequate response to Fico's strategy. Like many of their counterparts across Europe, Slovak liberals view the very idea of the nation with suspicion. Ever since nationalism "began to hate" in the first half of the twentieth century (Porter 2000), nationhood as a political concept has been under assault. The fear is that by essentializing the nation and its attributes, whether they are derived from culture, history, or geography, members of the national community become intolerant towards outsiders from without and ethnic minorities within. Consequently, contemporary liberals are keen to move away from "the nation-centred paradigm of history" (Hudek 2013, 180), which in their view tends to "homogenize society" (175). National histories were not always viewed in this way. In fact, classic nineteenth-century liberals such as John Stuart Mill and Alexander de Tocqueville understood well that a shared sense of belonging to a nation was an important source of social cohesion without which

a political community could not thrive. More recently, Francis Fukuyama used the example of Ukrainian nationalist mobilization in their fight against Russia to argue that "liberalism needs the nation" (Fukuyama 2022a, 80).

As a result of this constellation, the politics of memory in Slovakia and across Central Europe tends to be one-sided. While conservative and populist leaders, such as Fico, are at ease drawing on shared history and national pride when justifying their current political actions, liberals remain sceptical about the very basic parameters of such debates and are dismissive of "pompous celebrations" of key historical turning points (Hudek 2013, 175). With some exaggeration, one could argue that liberals use the nation as a category only when they are dismissive of its traditions and historical experiences. We should then not be surprised that it is "nationalists, populists and technocrats [who] gradually asserted their own form of the historical discourse to suit their objectives" (174). The implicit question of our paper is whether and how Slovak liberals could learn from their Ukrainian counterparts to prevent their populist and extreme-nationalist competitors from dominating debates about their national history. Thus, to the extent that contemporary Ukraine represents a viable example of nationalist mobilization for the fight for freedom,[1] there are obvious policy implications for Slovakia too. Though only Ukraine is fighting against a military intervention, in both countries, Ukraine and Slovakia, liberal and pro-European forces are being challenged by illiberal forces from within and without.

Echoing arguments of proponents of liberal nationalism (Auer 2004; Miller 1995; Tamir 1993, 2019), Fukuyama (2022b) wrote:

> National identity represents obvious dangers but also an opportunity. It is a social construct, and it can be shaped to support, rather than undermine, liberal values.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the February 2022 invasion, Fukuyama saw in Ukraine a clear demonstration of the positive power of nationalism. The war, particularly in the very first year, in which the extent and the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance surprised not merely Russian aggressors, but also some of the Western supporters of Ukraine, clearly showed "the abiding importance of national identity." As Fukuyama put it,

> Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Ukraine did not have an identity separate from that of Russia and that the country would collapse immediately once his invasion began. Instead, Ukraine has resisted Russia tenaciously precisely because its citizens are loyal to the idea of an independent, liberal democratic Ukraine and do not want to live in a corrupt dictatorship imposed from without. With their bravery, they have made clear that citizens are willing to die for liberal ideals, but only when those ideals are embedded in a country they can call their own.

An overly dismissive approach to your own nation is neither politically prudent nor desirable. A recent controversy in Slovak politics illustrates this case well. In a 2024 *Denník N* discussion about the insufficient support that the Slovak government extended to Ukraine, a prominent liberal journalist, Martin Šimečka, described Fico as a "leader of a small, cowardly nation, which never fought," later correcting himself by adding that "Slovaks are a nation of cowards, not a cowardly nation" (Tódová 2024). Šimečka's key aim was to highlight the heroism of the Ukrainian people, while criticizing the Slovak government's changing positions towards Russia and Ukraine. However, such a dismissive attitude to national memory was not helpful in the pursuit of this particular political agenda. All the more so, because Martin Šimečka is the father of the leader of the leading

Slovak opposition party, Progressive Slovakia, Michal Šimečka. Not surprisingly, then, the governing party – Fico's *Smer* – exploited the incident for its own purposes, going so far as to file a criminal complaint with the General Prosecutor's Office (Dlhopolec 2024).

The incident might seem trivial. But at its core is a political divide that is anything but trivial. It exposed the fundamental weakness of the liberal opposition in Slovakia, whose political rhetoric does not resonate with a majority of potential voters. Unless and until they find a way to engage with their nation's history in a more positive way, they risk leaving that space to their populist opponents. It is revealing in this respect that Slovak liberals are reluctant to discuss Slovakia's national interest, and if they do so, they are inclined to think of "Slovakia's interests or strategic objectives" as being identical with "those represented by the EU" (Brhlíková 2019, viii). Such a position is often articulated by pro-EU politicians and elites in other member states, including in the largest member, Germany, but it is intellectually incoherent and politically unwise. Blind adherence to the EU's agendas might expose politicians at the national level to the charges of inconsistency, even hypocrisy, particularly when the EU's positions abruptly change as a result of outside pressures. In fact, just as the EU's preferences and positions evolve over time, even the understanding of history might change.

Continuity and change in Slovak and EU attitudes towards Russia

For example, as long as German and European perspectives on Russia were guided by the principle that Europe's security can only be accomplished and maintained *with* Russia rather than *against* it, there was little contradiction between Fico's and the EU's positions. As Marušiak observed, already in 2001, Fico's "Smer unequivocally advocated Slovakia's entry into the EU and NATO while also emphasizing the need to cultivate friendly bilateral relations with Russia and build European security in cooperation." The party's programmatic document spoke in favour of supporting all Russian activities "in accordance with the principles of European civilization and its values, especially those concerning fundamental human rights and democracy" (Smer 2001, cited in Marušiak 2019, 11).

The ruling party's attitude logically follows from its interpretation of the meaning of the Second World War and Slovakia's role in it. Fico's approach shows a great deal of continuity with the narratives prevalent in communist Czechoslovakia, in which the key event that's at the heart of Slovak nation-building is the Slovak National Uprising (SNU) of 1944. The meaning of the SNU has been subject to competing interpretations from the early years and Fico's own analysis leans on and expands some of these narratives.

Initially, the SNU was presented as a joint effort of domestic, foreign, civilian, and communist resistance. In line with this, on the occasion of its first anniversary in August 1945, a large parade was organized, with the attendance of representatives of the US, UK, France, and the USSR. However, celebrations in the following years, especially in 1947, were greatly diminished in size. This reflected the stronger position of the Czech political representation and political infighting between the democratic and communist parties within Slovakia (Mannová 2008, 217). Notably, President Beneš referred to the SNU as "Banská Bystrica uprising" to frame it as a local event centred around the town of Banská Bystrica, in order to deemphasize its wider national character, and counter the ambition of a stronger Slovak representation in the reconstructed Czechoslovak state,

thus ensuring continuation with the interwar Czechoslovakist ideology (Kšiňaň and Michela 2012, 21).

The communist interpretations of the SNU, which gained a monopoly after 1948, stressed the central role of the communist party, including the role of the Czech leaders, who were seen as directing the uprising from their exile in Moscow. The uprising was construed as one in a string of pivotal events that led to the establishment of communist Czechoslovakia. The dominant interpretation began to be challenged in the early 1960s, as the thaw following Stalin's death enabled the publication of more critical accounts. Paradoxically, the thaw led to the emergence of two competing accounts of the SNU. On the one hand was the interpretation that sought to solidify the communists' claim to power. On the other hand, there was the interpretation that stressed the input of non-communist elements.

The communist narrative was decisively shaped by the future First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (1969–1987) and the President (1975–1989), Gustav Husák. From the outset, Husák positioned himself as one of the leading communists during the Uprising. In a Stalinist purge in the 1950s, he was persecuted by the communist regime, which accused him of "bourgeois nationalism," as it sought to downplay the national element of the uprising. In 1964, the now rehabilitated Husák published *Testimony about the Slovak National Uprising*, in which he claimed the centrality of his and the communist actions in the uprising, and which became the dominant narrative until 1989 (Husák 1964). In his testimony, Husák fully adopted the communist methodology, leading him to downplay the role of national consciousness. This is in contrast with his writings during the uprising, when he wrote, "a small nation and a small state cannot afford the luxury of splendid isolation. They have to seek the support of stronger and bigger ones" (cited in Jablonický 1994, 126).

Alternative views were advanced by a group of historians led by Jozef Jablonický from the Academy of Sciences, which focused on conducting empirical research. Jablonický's magisterial account of the SNU, *From Illegality to Uprising*, published in 1969, stressed the contribution of non-communist actors, especially the army. The book was banned four years later and Jablonický lost his job. He continued to publish in the form of samizdat, which was reprinted in the West. His work was not positively accepted abroad, as Jablonický stressed the SNU's positive contribution to the Slovak nation and identity, while a number of conservative historians residing abroad (e.g. Milan Ďurica) generally saw the SNU as unnecessary and undermining Slovak statehood (Macháček 2023, 54).

Jablonický's debate with exile politicians echoes the discourse on the nature of the Slovak nation. Jablonický (and another prominent historian, Ľubomír Lipták) accuse those who accept the Slovak statehood and reject the SNU of cowardice, as they defend the indefensible: passively accepting Hitler's actions. They argue that the SNU had an emancipating influence on the Slovak nationhood because its undertakers acted as "the progressive forces … [which] managed to bring the nation to the threshold of the new world order … as a self-confident and equal participant" (Lipták 1998, 260).

After the fall of communism, successive governments used the reference to the SNU to justify their policies. For example, Vladimír Mečiar, who dominated Slovak politics in the 1990s, used the SNU to justify the split of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the Slovak Republic in January 1993. More interestingly, the liberal elite used the memory of the SNU during the country's accession to the EU to justify why Slovakia should join the

organization. Martin Bútora, a prominent liberal intellectual, saw the role of the uprising in defining the Slovak nation's civilizational, civilian, cultural and geopolitical belonging and in denying authoritarianism, nationalism, provincialism, hesitation, and "meandering through history" (Bútora 2004, 474). This implies the need for Slovaks to prove they are worthy of becoming part of the EU. Similarly, President Andrej Kiska explicitly linked the SNU to the EU, saying "thanks to the uprising, we can stand here as proud citizens of a republic and as free Europeans" (Naxera and Krčál 2017, 289).

To sum up, even though the communist historiography evolved between the times of the immediate aftermath of the Uprising, the liberalization brought about by the Prague Spring in the 1960s, and the process of "normalization" after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the common theme remained the same: regime conformist historians assigned the central role to the Slovak (and/or Czechoslovak) Communist Party and the Soviet leadership in Moscow. This is significant for the contemporary relationship with Russia. Just as Putin's interpretation of Russia's history shows great affinity with Soviet historiography, Fico's understanding of Czechoslovak history makes him receptive to the Russian interpretation of the "roots" of the Ukrainian conflict today. However absurd Russia's claims about the need for Ukraine's denazification are, for Fico, who considers Putin's Russia a rightful inheritor of the glorious Soviet Union, which defeated Nazism in the Second World War, such claims are anything but outlandish.[2]

The state-sponsored commemoration of the Slovak National Uprising in 2024 offered Fico the opportunity to demonstrate both that Slovaks were on "the right side" of history in 1944 as they fought on the side of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, *and* today, when they insist on maintaining a friendly relationship with Russia, Western criticism notwithstanding. Yet, the claim about Slovaks being proven right by history is not self-evident. Before the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Slovaks had very little experience of statehood. The mythical claims about the Great Moravian Empire in the Ninth Century (c. 833–907) as a progenitor of contemporary Slovakia are far-fetched.

The only modern statehood that Slovaks experienced as an independent nation resulted from the German destruction of the first Czechoslovak Republic, which gave rise to Slovakia as a Nazi puppet state. To make it happen, far too many Slovaks collaborated. It is this historical fact that would support the claim that Slovaks are a nation of cowards. This is also the context in which this claim emerged, thanks to a prominent Czechoslovak intellectual and philosopher, Jan Patočka, who argued in the aftermath of the suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968 that Czechs were a nation of cowards, because they failed to fight for liberty in 1938/39 against Nazi Germany, and then again in 1968/69 against the Soviet Union (Patočka 1992). However difficult such a fight would have been on both historic occasions, Patočka argued that it was necessary and offered Czechs (and by implication, Slovaks too) the opportunity to prove themselves worthy of political nationhood. The irony is that Patočka proved his thesis about "cowardly" Czechs wrong through his own actions. Leading by example, he challenged the communist rule through the creation of the Charter 77 movement, paying the ultimate price as he died after a lengthy investigation by the secret police.

Patočka's argument was thus not merely an intriguing account of the Czech philosophy of history, but also a call to action. His writings were directed towards fellow dissident intellectuals who would have been receptive to his claims, notwithstanding significant

divisions in their ranks and their differing understandings of Czech history (Auer 2008). Patočka's views which urged Czechs to take more responsibility for their fate also resonated with a famous dispute between Milan Kundera and Václav Havel in 1968–69, in which Kundera defended Czechoslovak acquiescence to the Russian occupation as a sign of the Czech genius – a pragmatic and ultimately great response by a small nation to an impossible geopolitical challenge – while Havel criticized Kundera and his fellow citizens for complacency and lack of decisive actions in defence of liberty. An important participant in these debates was Milan Šimečka, the grandfather of the current leader of the Slovak opposition, Michal Šimečka. In the 1970s, in an influential samizdat, Milan Šimečka documented the process of the so-called "normalization," in which communist apparatchiks regained control over all aspects of cultural life relying on "the cowardice of those [fellow intellectuals] who concocted it and those who carried it out" (Šimečka 1984, 70). In 1988, on the eve of the Velvet Revolution, Milan Šimečka echoed Patočka's and Havel's perspectives, bemoaning the fact that "Czechs and Slovaks have successfully slithered through history" (Šimečka 1990, 108). The question that liberals in Slovakia need to address is whether assimilating Slovak history into Czech and Czechoslovak history continues to serve the purposes of contemporary Slovak politics.

In summary, it is plausible to advance a philosophy of Slovak history suggesting that yes, Slovaks are a nation of cowards (if one emphasizes their collaboration with Nazi Germany and acquiescence with the Soviet rule), or they could be viewed as fearless fighters for freedom (if one focuses on the Slovak National Uprising in 1944 and anti-communist opposition in, e.g., 1968 and 1988). Either way, the challenges that dissident intellectuals faced under communist rule are very different from those that Slovakia faces today.

Russia in Robert Fico's politics of memory

Robert Fico, in the debate about the nature of the Slovaks stemming from the experience with the SNU, largely adopts traditional communist narratives that emerged in the 1960s. His interpretations omit any mention of Slovak complicity in Hitler's dismantling of Czechoslovakia, thereby avoiding the need to confront allegations of Slovak "cowardice." Instead, he emphasizes the West's betrayal of (Czecho)Slovakia at Munich. This Western failure is contrasted with the positive and critical role of the Soviet Army, portrayed as both a supporter of the SNU and ultimately the liberator of the country (Naxera and Krčál 2016, 93). Through this rhetoric, Fico presents Russia as a historical friend and ally of the Slovaks, using this narrative to criticize EU policies and his domestic opponents. Adopting the communist narratives about the Slovak history and construing a positive role of the Russian nation in it has been a recurrent theme ever since Robert Fico started engaging with the politics of memory in the late 1990s.

In the domestic political discourse, his most infamous remarks concern his claim of not having noticed the events of November 1989, when Slovaks and Czechs peacefully protested against the communist regime during the Velvet Revolution (Vagovič 2016). Nevertheless, Fico has also made a variety of statements about the memory and importance of the Velvet Revolution, presenting a more complex relationship with the pivotal event in Slovakia's history. He has repeatedly described the Velvet Revolution as a necessary first step towards independence, which the Slovaks achieved three years

later. The struggle against the communist regime has thus been reinterpreted as a "fight for independence" (Hudek 2013, 176). This allowed Fico to embrace – or at least not reject – the memory of the event, while also distancing himself from what Hudek (2013, 173) calls the monopolizing "dissident narrative" about the importance of the event, formed by former dissidents under the communist regime.

Fico's reinterpretation of the Velvet Revolution has also often focused on the losers of the post-1989 transformation. This position aligns with the ostentatiously social democratic character of this political party and provides another platform for challenging the liberal elite. As Mark et al. (2015) demonstrate, this is a common position in the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe, echoed in the rhetoric of *Fidesz* in Hungary, Law and Justice (*PiS*) in Poland and *Die Linke* in former East Germany. The exclusive claim on the legacy of the Velvet Revolution by the liberals resulted in a failure to develop a unifying consensual 1989 tradition in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (Mark et al. 2015, 483). In his last blow to the 1989 memory, in June 2025, Fico announced the abolition of the public holiday dedicated to its commemoration as part of fiscal consolidation measures.

The divide between Fico and the liberals on the legacy of 1989 is also reflected in their views of Russia, which in both cases is closely linked to the interpretation of Russia's role in installing and upholding the communist regime in Slovakia. While the liberals paint a picture of a belligerent and revisionist country, Fico is more accommodating in his actions and rhetoric. His views on Ukraine are partly derived from the actual nature of Russo-Ukrainian relations, in which he leans towards the Russian position. Another factor influencing Fico's view of Ukraine is his rather negative personal experience of dealing with Ukrainian officials. As a result of this, Fico's position on the war in Ukraine diverges from the European mainstream; however, it has been consistent over the past two decades. Russian invasions of Georgia, Crimea and the Donbass occurred on his watch, and his government always duly denounced Russian actions, just as his current government's *official* position – somewhat at odds with numerous statements critical of Ukraine – is to identify Russia as the aggressor and support the sovereignty of Ukraine over all Russian-occupied territories.

Fico has long maintained an uneasy relationship with Ukraine, due to which he at times departed from the European position. When the supplies of Russian gas stopped in 2009 due to the commercial dispute between Russian and Ukrainian firms, Fico broke away from fellow Europeans and supported the Russian side, calling on the Ukrainians to stop obstructing gas deliveries. A *Politico* report suggested that Fico suffered humiliation when dealing with Ukrainian politicians at that time, which influenced his future views of the country (Cienski and Melkozerova 2023).

The Slovak Prime Minister had at the same time openly criticized the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, because its operation would have led to a significant loss of gas transit revenue for Slovakia (Cunningham 2015). Fico's focus on Slovakia's economic interest thus resulted in his criticism of Russia's steps. He has also expressed a critical stance towards the Minsk agreements that dealt with the Donbas war of 2014–15, particularly highlighting that Ukraine has done "even less than Russia" to fulfill the Minsk agreement obligations. While he criticized the effectiveness of sanctions and their economic impact on Slovakia and the EU, he stated he would respect the European solidarity on the matter.

While Fico's initial reaction to Russia's invasion was to denounce it, from the early days of the war, he insisted that Ukraine was a victim of the conflict between the US and Russia,

called for an immediate ceasefire and peace settlement, and warned about the EU becoming irrelevant due to its use of sanctions (SITA 2022). Fico's political party, Smer, supported only one declarative statement of the Slovak parliament in support of Ukraine. Notably, the party did not support the adoption of the May 2022 resolution denouncing Russian war crimes in Bucha and Irpin.

Fico's political position towards the war in Ukraine resonated with a large part of the Slovak electorate, securing him the largest share of the vote in September 2023. In their analysis of engagement with Fico's Facebook posts, Pažma and Saxonberg (2024) found that the most popular posts included Fico's denouncement of anti-Russian sanctions, opposition to the provision of weapons to Ukraine, presenting the war as a conflict between the US and Russia, and the criticism of the war's impact on the cost of living (Pažma and Saxonberg 2024). Support for these sentiments was also found in public opinion surveys, further confirming that Fico's political messaging found strong support among Slovaks (Mesežnikov 2022).

Concluding remarks

The divide between Slovak liberals and Fico in their position on Ukraine is similar to the debate on the legacy of 1989. While Fico primarily stresses the socioeconomic impact of the war on Slovakia, most liberals invoke values. By stressing the economic consequences of 1989 and 2022, Fico avoids passing value judgements on the communist (1989) and Putin's (2022) regimes. And by partially adopting Russia's arguments about the necessity of the war caused by NATO's and the EU's involvement in Ukraine, he repeats the rhetoric about the SNU, in which the West is the cause of the trouble and the Russians are pragmatically searching for a settlement.

Fico's position was at odds with the EU mainstream between 2022 and 2025, during which the *Zeitenwende* speech on 27 February 2022, by the then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz marked a radical change of perspective (Scholz 2022). In the aftermath of the Russian full-blown invasion of Ukraine, leading EU politicians have argued that peace in Europe can only be safeguarded *against*, not *with* Russia. This was further reinforced by Putin being publicly described as a war criminal, a designation that makes the very idea of peace negotiations implausible. Yet, at the time of writing, the tide seems to have been turning as the EU's relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the US *and* Russia forced European politicians to endorse the US President Donald Trump's attempts at negotiations. Through his meeting with Putin in September 2025 in Beijing, Fico exposed the incoherence of the EU's position. On the one hand, European leaders, such as the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, criticized the Slovak Prime Minister for travelling to China and meeting Putin, the war criminal. On the other hand, they were keen to find out what steps – if any – the Russian leader was willing to make for a peaceful settlement. By the time this article is published, we might know better which approach proved more viable – the one pursued by Trump or the more confrontational one pursued by the EU and its liberal supporters in Slovakia at least until the summer of 2025.

By aligning themselves closely with the EU positions, Slovak liberals risked losing the domestic debate about the purpose and meaning of Slovak history, which in turn might further contribute to the decline of their electoral support. This is not an argument in favour of Fico's positions. Quite the opposite. Instead, Slovak

liberals ought to develop a more nuanced position, which would enable them to draw on the lessons from both contemporary Ukraine and the Slovak national history. To fight for freedom in defiance of Nazi domination, Slovaks staged a *national* uprising, and national mobilization remains as important as it ever was, also in defiance of dangers emanating from Putin's Russia. This is why liberal political leaders cannot afford to leave debates about Slovak national history and Slovak nationhood more generally to their populist opponents. Describing their people as a nation of cowards is unlikely to endear political leaders to their electorate. Admittedly, it was not Michal, but Martin Šimečka who chose to use such confrontational language. In fact, such rhetoric arguably betrays the spirit of both Milan Šimečka's and Patočka's argumentation. These dissident intellectuals were in a very different position from the one journalists and political leaders in Slovakia currently have. Their debates were often limited to fellow dissident intellectuals rather than aiming to gain mass popular support. Today, the open contest of democratic contestation necessitates messaging that appeals to a far wider cross-section of the population.

We conclude with a modest proposal. Following the Ukrainian example of liberal nationalist mobilization, Michal Šimečka could have used the backlash against his dad by positioning himself as a politician concerned with winning electoral support, not merely an intellectual argument. Publicly distancing himself from the argument of his father, Martin, Michal Šimečka could have presented himself as a pragmatic politician. Even while acknowledging that yes, some Slovaks might have failed to live up to the challenges of their own time, he might have rejected the claim that Slovaks are a nation of cowards, because it essentializes the nation in a way that's both politically unhelpful and historically inaccurate. It should not be left just to populists to acknowledge that even Slovaks have now and then shown heroism and political wisdom.

Notes

1. As Dandolov (2025) observed, "the brand of nationalism associated with the majority of Ukrainians has been characterized as forward-thinking, tolerant of outsiders (except for those affiliated with the Russian state), and bereft of feelings of superiority towards other ethnicities." At the same time, Malešević (2025, 31–32) cautions that "[t]he contemporary Ukrainian nationalism is characterised by pronounced tension between the civic and ethnic, conservative and liberal, radical and moderate wings."
2. Fico's and Putin's interpretations of the Second World War are in stark contrast with the most recent position taken by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, which seemed to question Russia and China winning the war and defeating Nazism (eudebates.tv 2025).

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