

# Polarization and Assassination

## May 2024

Initial report on polarization, societal sentiments, and popular narratives following the assassination attempt of the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico

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# TECHNICAL INFORMATION & PURPOSE OF THE REPORT ●

Since its establishment in 2020, the DEKK Institute has been studying social cohesion in Slovakia, which is closely related to polarization. Both have been a long-standing problem in Slovakia, and if the erosion of cohesion and increase in polarization goes too far, the result can be violence - a problem we have [publicly warned about](#) in the past. During times of crisis, such as an assassination attempt, reliable information is of great value. Without it, decision-makers have difficulty finding their bearings and can spend their time, attention, and resources suboptimally. DEKK Institute has responded to this situation by pulling together a team of scientists and subject-matter experts to create an initial report that provides stakeholders, change agents, and the general public with insight into the dynamics of polarization and general recommendations for facilitating social cohesion during this time of crisis.

This team consists of members of the DEKK Institute, the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (IESA SAS), the analytical company Culture Pulse, the University of Agder, and the security think-tank Adapt Institute. The task was to provide an initial analysis of the societal atmosphere that led up to the assassination attempt on the Slovak prime minister Robert Fico. These efforts are inspired by the work of the Czech-based National Institute of Systemic Risks (SYRI), which was founded with the purpose of providing the civil service quick access to scientists and analysts that can produce high quality research in public interest at a breakneck speed during a crisis. As the refugee crisis, COVID, the war in Ukraine and now the assassination attempt have shown, such an initiative could certainly be of use in Slovakia.

We aimed for the highest academic standards, acknowledging the limits of our efforts given our attempt to provide the report within 12 days following the crisis. Such a report would be far less valuable after 6 or 12 months, though later reports will no doubt have a better overview with some hindsight. In some cases, we rely on our field experience rather than non-existing quantitative data. In such cases, this is clearly indicated in the text. We have also avoided using scientific jargon as much as possible, in order to make the report as accessible as possible. This report can be freely shared, keeping in mind that the main purpose is to provide reliable information to the public and the decision-makers.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ●

- Slovak prime minister Robert Fico was shot by an attacker on 15th of May at 14:35 CET in the town of Handlova after the cabinet meeting. The general consensus attributes the attack to high social polarization, but there is no longer agreement on who caused this polarization. That itself is a characteristic of a polarized society.
- According to the V-DEM Project data, Slovakia is the third most polarized country in Europe, right after their neighbors Poland and Hungary. Reasons for this polarization are mostly local and can not be explained only by global nor regional trends. Examples are historically eroded social cohesion and fragmented collective identity, same as more recent reasons such as cost of living crisis, politicized discontent with management of the COVID pandemics and uncivil behavior and personal animosities of the political elite.
- Related indicators, some being drivers, and some having an amplifying effect, are the spread of disinformation and vulnerability of the general population against the social media algorithms. Alarming is the growing number of Slovaks convinced that radical solutions and revolution are needed in order to achieve a desired social change. This belief has increased 9-fold in the last 25 years, from 2.8% of the population in 1998 to 25.7% in 2023.
- During May 2024, dominant public sentiment was anxiety, followed by anger. Right after the attack anger grew substantially, while anxiety only slightly. What differed from the other attacks in the region is that typically, attacks that hurt or kill people bring the emotions of sadness and warmth into the forefront, while the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister did not. This suggests that even the segment of the population that condemned the attack had difficulty feeling empathy for the victim.
- Attempts to label the attacker as a “radical progressive” or a “militant xenophobic nationalists” are common, do not correspond to the more complicated reality, and are becoming a potent fuel for the cycle of polarization driving public tensions even higher.
- Any link between the attacker and the now defunct Slovak paramilitary group Slovenskí branci (SB) is, to the best of our knowledge, a coincidence.
- Depolarization recommendations: behave like an anthropologist, promote (guided) intergroup contact, take perspective, address root grievances, lead by example.
- Best practices after assassinations - Slovakia managed relatively well, ticking most of the major crisis management boxes known publicly from other attacks on politicians. However, the political elites missed the opportunity of showing political unity in the earliest days after the attempted assassination, when the incumbent president and the president elect jointly called for leaders of the parliamentary parties to meet at the joint round table as a symbolic gesture that would help lower polarization.

# INTRODUCTION ●

Slovak prime minister Robert Fico was shot by 71-year-old Juraj Cintula from Levice on May 15th, 2024, shortly after 2PM, as Fico met members of the public at a cabinet retreat in the Slovak town of Handlova. In the past, the attacker worked as a security guard in a shopping center. He had a legally owned gun. The assailant faces 25 years to life in prison and has been charged with attempted premeditated murder. The attack came after widespread public protests against the government of Robert Fico, led by the current opposition parties, that had brought [tens of thousands](#) of people into the streets every week for months, starting from [7th of December 2023](#). Members of the coalition parties accuse the opposition of fuelling polarization and blame the media for spreading anti-governmental narratives; the opposition claims that the coalition is trying to shift the burden of responsibility. Meanwhile, societal polarization has never been higher in Slovakia.

Robert Fico was not the first victim of political violence in recent years. Just two years ago on 12th October 2022 a politically motivated attacker shot two people to death in an LGBTQ bar named "Tepláreň" in Bratislava. A less known fact is that it was a target of opportunity, eventually chosen because of its accessibility. Original plan of the attacker was prime minister Eduard Heger, but the attacker couldn't reach him. Other targets of priority were members of the Jewish community, or COVID pandemics crisis managers. On 4th of October this year, an unknown woman broke into the garden of the current Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová, and was pacified by her security detail.

The assassination attempt on Robert Fico was a rare incident in the sense that it was an attack on a prime minister. But not when it comes to political violence in general. According to the ACLED project, which unites 200 analysts and experts mapping political violence and disorder worldwide, it has been on the rise for years, with [documented cases from Germany, France, Sweden or the USA](#), caused by both far right and far left.

Murders of politicians are relatively [rare in 21st century Europe](#), but they happen every few years, among the most prominent being the murder of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in Belgrade in 2003 and British Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016. What both murders have in common is that they took place at a time of high polarization and burning passions - Đinđić was assassinated after Serbia's turn to the West and a strong campaign against organized crime, Cox just before Britain's vote to leave the European Union, known as "Brexit".

Our team analyzed the state of polarization in Slovakia, public sentiments pre- and post-attack and offered insights into some of the main narratives that started to spread in both media and social networks. In the end of our report, we offer recommendations on how to help manage the growing polarization, and several post-assassination best practices that worked in other European countries.

# CHAPTER 1: COHESION AND POLARIZATION IN SLOVAKIA ●

## WHAT IS POLARIZATION, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT ●

Social polarization means the division of society into groups with contrasting values and ideological attitudes. A certain level of polarization is normal in societies that tolerate different views. If it goes beyond a certain healthy level, division turns into disintegration and groups with different opinions turn into tribes that see each other as rivals with incompatible goals. High polarization begins to create an 'us versus them' mentality, nurturing hostility and undermining constructive dialogue and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, high polarization:

- **Undermines social cohesion** by creating an environment of mutual distrust and suspicion between groups, thus weakening collective identity and the sense of community.<sup>2</sup>
- **Hinders cooperation and the search for compromise**, as polarized groups tend to dismiss opposing views as illegitimate, making it difficult to engage in reasonable discussions and find common ground.<sup>3</sup>
- **Renders it difficult to agree on priorities**, which results in the society's inability to plan and make long-term cultural and economic investments, and manage crises.<sup>4</sup>
- **Escalates conflict** by reinforcing group identities and promoting a black and white vision of the world with a zero-sum mentality that increases the likelihood of violence or extremism.<sup>5</sup>
- **Leads to legislative paralysis** when it affects political elites, who become incapable of compromise, which hinders effective governance and policy-making.<sup>6</sup>
- **Undermines confidence in democratic processes and institutions**, as some segments of the population come to see them as biased and illegitimate. This sets the stage for authoritarian tendencies among political elites.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, this may make authoritarian politicians more attractive assassination targets<sup>9</sup> - the more powerful the ruler, the greater the impact of assassination on the state.

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1 Glasl, F. (1982). The Process of Conflict Escalation and Roles of Third Parties. In: Bomers, G.B.J., Peterson, R.B. (Eds.) Conflict Management and Industrial Relations. Springer, Dordrecht. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1132-6\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1132-6_6)

2 Delhey, J., Boehnke, K., Dragolov, G., Ignácz, Z. S., Larsen, M., Lorenz, J. & Koch, M. (2018). Social Cohesion and Its Correlates: A Comparison of Western and Asian Societies. *Comparative Sociology*, 17(3-4), 426-455. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341468>

3 Hrbková, L., Macek, J., & Macková, A. (2024). How Does the "Us" versus "Them" Polarization Work? Capturing Political Antagonism with the Political Antagonism Scale. *East European Politics and Societies*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254231215513>

4 Kosnác, P. & Gloss, H. (2023) Trends of [dis]trust 2023. DEKK Institute, Bratislava. See: <https://www.dekk.institute/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/en-dekk-report-trendy-nedovery-2023-web.pdf>

5 Piazza, J. A. (2023). Political Polarization and Political Violence. *Security Studies*, 32(3), 476-504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2225780>

6 McCoy, J. & Somer, M. (2021) Overcoming Polarization. *Journal of Democracy*, 32 (1), 6-21. Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0012>.

7 McCoy, J., Rahman, T. & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576>

8 Svobik, M. (2019) Polarization Versus Democracy. *Journal of Democracy* 30 (3) (July 2019): 20-32. See: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/polarization-versus-democracy/>

9 Jones, B.F. & Olken, B.A. (2009) Hit or Miss? The Effect of Assassinations on Institutions and War, *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* 1 (2), July 2009, 55-87. See: <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/mac.1.2.55>

- **Negatively impacts the mental health of the population**, as living in a highly polarized environment leads to increased chronic stress, which affects decision-making processes in the brains of individuals and consequently the overall functioning of society.<sup>10</sup>
- **Damages relationships**. At worst, it explicitly divides families. At best, it leads to a “ban” on discussing politics and other polarizing topics at home or with friends.<sup>11</sup> This both inhibits the formation of deep relationships that are created through deep discussions and reduces the capacity for constructive dialogue about emotionally charged topics. It also contributes to the creation of information bubbles.
- **Increases brain drain**, leading Slovakia to lose much of its young talent. Young people are sensitive to bad relationships, and at the same time they are much more mobile, usually without commitments such as family, work and mortgages that tend to tie people to a particular place. The result is considerable social and economic damage to the country, the loss of future social elites (many of the most talented people find it easier to settle abroad), and the acceleration of the inversion of the pension pyramid, among other things.<sup>12</sup>
- **Intensifies anti-system tendencies in society**, motivating the creation of parallel societies and alternatives to existing state services and institutions, such as the emergence of alternative currencies or alternative security forces.
- **Reduces trust** and reinforces tribalism, which in turn reinforces corruption and nepotism, as people in low-trust environments tend to trust only those closest to them. This weakens state institutions, and consequently society as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Nayak, S.S., Fraser, T., Panagopoulos, C. Aldrich, D.P., Kim, D. (2021) Is divisive politics making Americans sick? Associations of perceived partisan polarization with physical and mental health outcomes among adults in the United States, *Social Science & Medicine*, 284, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113976>.

11 Kosnáč, P. & Gloss, H. (2024) [Anti]systém na Slovensku. DEKK Institute. See: <https://www.dekk.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/antisystem-na-slovensku-2023.pdf>

12 Magnet pre talent, VAIA (2023), See: [https://vaia.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/white\\_paper\\_1\\_magnet\\_pre\\_talent\\_online.pdf](https://vaia.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/white_paper_1_magnet_pre_talent_online.pdf)

13 Brown, D., Touchton, M., Whitford, A. (2006). Political Polarization as a Constraint on Government: Evidence from Corruption. *World Development*. 39. 10.2139/ssrn.782845.



## CYCLE OF POLARIZATION ●

**Polarization** is a complex process, shaped by a diversity of biological and psychological factors (genetics, neurology, personality, etc.) as well as contextual factors at a variety of levels (personal life, family, community, global trends, etc.). It is nigh impossible to calculate the causal connections and balance between these factors in particular cases of polarization. However, it is possible to identify some recurrent mental and behavioral patterns that are present in almost all cases. Based on the experience of depolarization projects abroad<sup>14</sup>, and our own field-research practice, we propose the following five stage model of the cycle of polarization:

**Phase 1: Simplification of reality.** People accept convenient and seemingly harmless mental shortcuts that caricature the motivations for other people's actions.

**Phase 2: Labeling of others.** People are lumped together under negative categories such as "desolates" (similar meaning to "deplorables"), "snowflakes", "fascists", or "Soros-lovers" (for example). The mental task of assessing an individual's actions or arguments is offloaded, because "we know exactly what the whole group is up to". The apparent absurdity of the caricatures of the (other) group removes a person's need and willingness to listen to their arguments, let alone try to understand them.

**Phase 3: Moral superiority.** When the rejection of other views becomes saturated with moral judgements, and the distinction between an opinion and a person is lacking, one's opponent is not simply different - they are evil. And we do not negotiate with evil. It must be defeated or even completely destroyed.

**Phase 4: Polarization or fragmentation** (if there are more than two camps) of society. At the edges of the opinion polarization, groups emerge that take on a tribe mentality. At this stage, group identity is strengthened at the expense of a so-called overarching identity. In practice, this means that it may be more important for a person to be a nationalist or a liberal than a Slovak. This weakens civic identity and social cohesion in Slovakia.

**Phase 5: Entrenchment.** People become more willing to fight and exclude others who have already been caricatured, labeled, morally condemned and disconnected from "our" identity (they are no longer part of "us"). Such entrenchment fosters calls for ideological purity in the social environment. Sometimes people even become unwilling to work in the same workplace or to go on a date with individuals from different political persuasions. This is the most dangerous phase of the cycle of polarization, often the last stage before violence is seen as a legitimate solution to political problems - and expected in return.

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14 Polarisation and Cohesion (2021) BRIDGE - Understanding and addressing polarization at the local level, European Forum for Urban Security. See: [https://issuu.com/efus/docs/publication\\_bridge\\_en\\_pages/s/13483564](https://issuu.com/efus/docs/publication_bridge_en_pages/s/13483564)



## POLARIZATION IN SLOVAKIA ●

Slovakia was already one of the moderately polarized countries in 2000, when social polarization in Europe was beginning to be measured by the V-DEM Project (see graph below). Since then, polarization in Slovakia has been stagnating or rising, with almost negligible exceptions between 2010 and 2012.<sup>15</sup> The sharpest increases in social polarization in a single year were recorded in years 2006, 2015 and 2019.

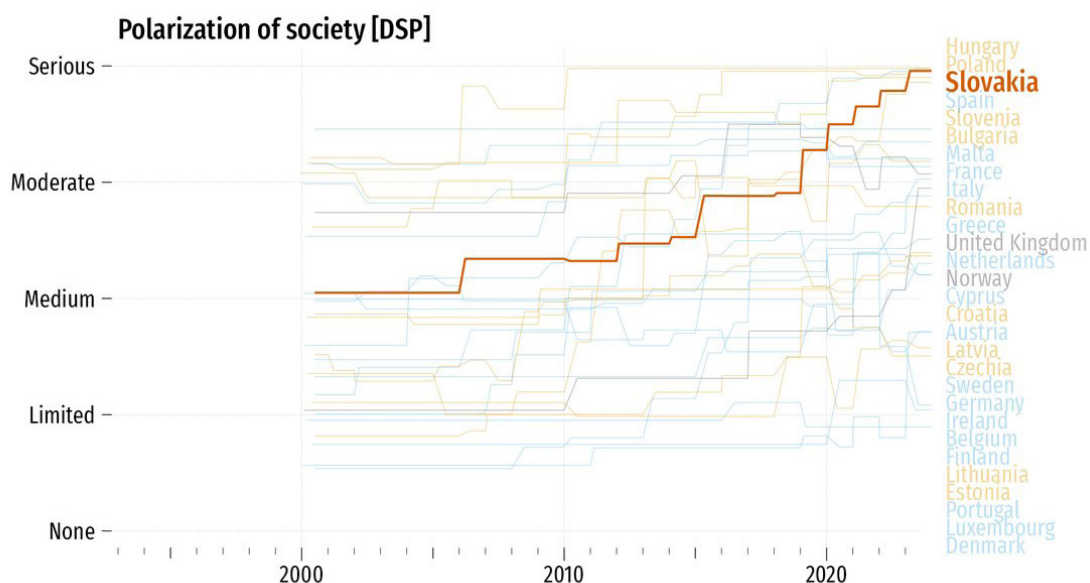


Chart 1: Overview of the evolution of societal polarization in Slovakia between 2000 and 2023<sup>16</sup>

The steepest long-term growth in polarization is recorded between 2019 and 2023. The COVID pandemic is no doubt partly responsible for this steep growth; many people found it very difficult to bear the state's intrusion into their privacy, limitations of civil liberties, and increases of online censorship. Most people in the country had no idea that the state even had such (emergency) powers, and it was a shock to them that greatly reduced their sense of security and control over their lives. Trust in state institutions as such also declined, and trust in the Slovak government was measured at an all-time low (14%, during Eduard Heger's government).<sup>17</sup>

We don't know exactly what factors are responsible for social polarization, and the influences varies per country, but research shows that in general ruling elites have a large influence on polarization of a country<sup>18</sup>, and following from their political positions also the biggest share of responsibility, as they usually have the most direct executive powers, and the most media space.

15 Varieties of Democracy Project (VDP), V-Dem Institute, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. See: <https://www.v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/>

16 Juraj Medzihorský, Varieties of Democracy Project. See: <https://x.com/medzihorsky/status/1791048759570252088/photo/1>.

17 Kosnáč P. & Gloss H. (Eds.) 2023. Súdržnosť na Slovensku: Čo drží krajinu pokope a na čom sa rozpadá? DEKK Inštitút, Bratislava, p. 322

18 Santoro, L.R., Assaf, E., Bond, R.M., Cranmer, S.J., Kaizar, E.E., Sivakoff, .D.J. (2021) Exploring the direct and indirect effects of elite influence on public opinion. PLoS One. Nov 19;16(11).

**Polarization is also reinforced by other factors and social trends.** The following list is based on both research and expert opinion in the area of social cohesion, polarization and collective identity. These factors include:

### **Growing appetite for radical solutions.**

The number of Slovaks who believe that social change can be achieved through reforms and compromise is decreasing, and the percentage of the population convinced that radical solutions are needed in order to achieve a desired change is increasing. This belief has increased 9-fold in the last 25 years, from 2.8% of the population in 1998 to 25.7% in 2023.<sup>19 20</sup> This is an alarming increase in distrust in the ability of the political establishment to solve society's problems.

### **Polycrisis response.**

Related to the perceived efficiency of the government is the perceived efficiency of managing different crises of recent years. Slovak political elites nor Slovak citizens are responsible for the migration wave of 2015-2016, COVID-19 pandemics, war in Ukraine combined with a refugee wave of spring of 2022 or the cost of living crisis. But politicization of these topics and inability to agree on how to manage them are until these days a source of social and political tensions. At the same time, long-standing sources of polarization and culture wars, such as issues of bioethics, did not recede from the public sphere, intensifying the social tensions.<sup>21</sup>

### **Elite polarization and emptying moderate center.**

Several studies show the hollowing out of the moderate political center, and the strengthening of the fringes on both the left and the right of the political spectrum.<sup>22 23</sup> Best summary we have seen comes from the Carnegie report: *"Parties and candidates clearly believe that more polarizing candidates are more likely to win elections. This may be a self-fulfilling prophecy: voters exposed to more polarizing rhetoric from leaders who share their partisan identity are likely to alter their preferences based on their understanding of what their group believes and has normalized—particularly among primary voters whose identity is more tied to their party."*<sup>24</sup> This makes it more difficult to form stable coalitions, increases the risk of radical public policies, and further reduces trust in the political system. It also reduces a choice for a moderate voter to pick a moderate candidate - since less moderate people are willing to enter politics, and there are simply less of those who do, because political parties think moderation won't help them win elections.

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19 Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen (Eds.) 2022. World Values Survey: All Rounds - Country-Pooled Datafile. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WWSA Secretariat. Dataset Version 3.0.0. doi:10.14281/18241.17

20 Kosnáč, P. & Gloss, H. (2024) [Anti]system na Slovensku. DEKK Institute. See: <https://www.dekk.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/antisystem-na-slovensku-2023.pdf>

21 Lutherova, S. & Volanska, L. (2023) Families in Times of Crisis: Narratives of Family and Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Slovakia, East European Politics and Societies. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254231182996>

22 Carmines, E.G., Ensley, M.J., Wagner, M.W. (2012). Who Fits the Left-Right Divide? Partisan Polarization in the American Electorate. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56 (12): 1631-1653.

23 Hahm, H., Hilpert, D., König, T. (2022). Divided by Europe: affective polarisation in the context of European elections. *West European Politics*. 46 (4): 705-731.

24 Kleinfeld, R. (2023) Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says, Working paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

In other words, the temptation for political elites not to try to dampen polarization but to use it to advance their agenda is high. And the same temptation extends to other actors that are part of the public life - including media or public intellectuals.

### **Appeal of polarizing leaders.**

Polarizing leaders appeal to our basic evolutionary instincts. They seem very self-confident in their claims, and since they typically don't have to nuance reality very much, and use much more black and white rhetoric, their message seems clearer.<sup>25</sup> And a clearer message seems truer, while complex and nuanced messages cause confusion. That has a strong effect, especially in times of insecurity.<sup>26</sup> Such as our times. This applies to leaders in politics, but also elsewhere - ranging from business and media to civil society or religious organizations.

### **Geopolitical identity.**

The geopolitical identity of Slovaks is the least coherent of all post-communist countries, with the exception of Bulgaria. Despite being members of Western international institutions such as the European Union and NATO, Slovaks have the strongest nostalgia for socialism of the entire Vysegrad Four (V4) region, approaching two-thirds of the population. Unlike Poles, Czechs, and even Hungarians, who are traditionally skeptical of both Western countries and international institutions, Slovaks are the only ones in the V4 with a larger minority of population that sees the East and Russia as a real geopolitical alternative. While in other V4 countries Russia is an alternative for 1-2% of the population, in Slovakia it was 11% in 2021<sup>27</sup>, and today it is up to 19% of the population.<sup>28</sup> Only a quarter to third of the Slovak population claims to be pro-Western (depending on the method<sup>29</sup>), with just over 50% seeing themselves somewhere „in between“. The lack of consensus on the geopolitical orientation of society thus hampers the ability to find common ground in a collective identity, and therefore a shared vision for the country.

### **Willingness to defend one's own country.**

The willingness to defend one's own country is one of the indicators of social cohesion. This willingness has a long-term downward trend in Slovakia, with various surveys finding somewhere between **20-30% of Slovaks expressed such willingness**. By comparison, in Hungary it is around 50%, in Poland around 70%, and in Finland over 80%.<sup>30 31</sup> This figure drops further when this willingness is broken down into concrete activities, with the willingness to use a weapon usually half that of the general willingness. Thus, in the case of a conventional war similar to the one in Ukraine, in which Slovakia would be forced to defend itself for weeks, months, or longer, Slovakia would have a serious problem with manpower.

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25 Petersen, M.B. et.al. (2022) The Evolutionary Psychology of Conflict and the Functions of Falsehood. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197578384.003.0007>.

26 McAdams, D.P. (2017) The Appeal of the Primal Leader: Human Evolution and Donald J. Trump. *Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 1 (2) <https://doi.org/10.26613/esic.1.2.45>.

27 Globsec (2022). *Globsec Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine*, See: <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>

28 Kosnáč, P. & Gloss, H. (2024) [Anti]system na Slovensku. DEKK Institute: Bratislava. See: <https://www.dekk.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/antisystem-na-slovensku-2023.pdf>

29 Globsec's "Globsec Trends 2022" used a computer panel coming with 34% people claiming Slovakia belongs to the West, DEKK's "[Anti]system in Slovakia" study used CAPI method in 2023 and got 22.3%.

30 Presl D. (2024) Fostering a 'Will to Fight' Has to be NATO's Next Priority. See: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/fostering-will-fight-has-be-natos-next-priority>

31 Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C. & et al. (Eds.) (2022). *World Values Survey: All Rounds - Country-Pooled Datafile*. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WWSA Secretariat. Dataset Version 3.0.0. doi:10.14281/18241.17

### **Historical memory.**

This polarization is also hard to reduce because of the difficulty in consolidating the historical memory of the population after the turbulent 20th century. Countries such as Germany have taken particular care to do this because they realize that social cohesion requires at least a small common denominator to forge a collective identity.<sup>32</sup> And this tends to be based, at least in part, on a common history. Slovakia has neglected this aspect, and is reaping the consequences. The situation is not helped by the fact that various state-funded institutions working with historical memory are often in mutual contradiction even in the interpretation of basic historical facts, not to mention non-official rhetorics and political discourse. The situation is illustrated by the fact that the last time all existing institutions were able to address sensitive historical moments in Slovakia - such as the period of the wartime Slovak state (1939-1945) - was at a joint conference in 1992.<sup>33</sup>

### **Disinformation.**

It is difficult to quantify the damage on the fabric of society caused by the spread of disinformation on social networks in Slovakia, at least part of which is caused by the [information operations of the Russian Federation in recent years](#). The inability to find common ground, sometimes even on basic facts (e.g., does a COVID pandemic exist or not), is a massive chronic stressor on the human brain that feeds polarization and increases social tensions.

### **Social media.**

A wide [scholarly consensus states](#) that social media are not a main source of polarization - but they are a key facilitator. The reasons are manifold, but include the impunity of anonymity, making people behave worse than they normally would and creating confrontations with radically different people who would likely never meet in real life (not all diversity leads to the appreciation of otherness). One of the most damaging features of social media is the use of algorithms that maximize and prolong user engagement, since that is usually achieved by showing shocking, appalling or provoking content.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Larsen, C.A. (2014) Social cohesion: Definition, measurement and developments. Institut for Statskundskab, Aalborg Universitet, p.4.

33 Conference proceedings: Pokus o politický a osobný profil Jozefa Tisu (1992) Častá-Papiernička, 5th to 7th May 1992, Slovak Academic Press in cooperation with Slovak National Council and Slovak Institute in Rome.

34 Barrett, P.M., Hendrix, J., Sims, J.G. (2021) Fueling the Fire: How Social Media Intensifies U.S. Political Polarization And What Can Be Done About It, New York University, Stern School of Business.

## PUBLIC SENTIMENT BEFORE AND AFTER THE ATTACK.

Shortly after the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico, a content moderation company active in Slovakia, ELV.ai, which moderates a significant amount of social media, media, and blog traffic in the CEE region, released data concerning the nature of sentiment changes in the months preceding the attempted assassination, and in the hours following, focusing on moderated content that was deemed potentially toxic.<sup>35</sup> This provides a unique insight into the nature of the public discourse surrounding the event as it includes data that was in fact moderated, despite most of the content remaining online; to date, studies of social media content analysis around a national crisis rely exclusively on unmoderated content still online.

The data from ELV.ai were further analyzed in comparison to data from the 2023 Prague school shooting at Charles University. The results showed that in both cases, anger significantly increased, but the anger surrounding the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister increased even more than in comparison to the Prague shooting. In addition, uncertainty and anxiety also increased in both incidents. However, whereas sadness and warmth increased overall in the Prague shooting data, data around the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister showed a marked decrease in sadness and warmth (a positive emotion associated with connection with others or lovingness). This marker is unexpected for any shooting event, as typically sadness over an attempted murder, particularly during the first 48 hours where it was unclear that Prime Minister Fico would survive the attempted assassination and was undergoing multiple surgery's in critical condition. The reversal of emotional reactions there appears to show that, while the Prague shooting was generally viewed as a tragedy worthy of empathy, this was not the case for the Prime Minister's assassination attempt. Instead, sadness went down and so did warmth, suggesting that the overall media landscape showed proportionally a shift towards more anger and anxiety and less sadness and warmth. This is not to say that, overall, the population was experiencing happiness; as in the Czech case, happiness was significantly lower in the data post shooting. Nevertheless, different pockets of social media can have unique reactions that drive the overall trends in these emotional reactions.<sup>36</sup>



Chart 2: Overall social media reactions to the 2023 Prague Shooter (on the left) and the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico (on the right).

<sup>35</sup> This does not mean that it was moderated or censored. ELV.ai noted that most of the content flagged for moderation was in fact left online after review. See: [Forbes](#)

<sup>36</sup> Authors realize that comparison of attacks on university students in the Czech republic has a different cultural and social context than an attack on a controversial political figure in Slovakia. We use this case to underline the differences between sentiments during two national crises that happened in quick succession in culturally related geopolitical area, not to suggest that they are the same type of crisis.

## MEDIA TRACTION POST EVENT ●

During the last week, we used the ARES<sup>37</sup> analytical tool to monitor and analyze the rhetoric and sentiments expressed across different political groups in Slovakia, helping to identify the factors that contribute to social cohesion or polarization. By examining these digital footprints, ARES provides a nuanced understanding of the emotional and cognitive underpinnings of public discourse. This approach is particularly valuable, as it helps to uncover the underlying social tensions and potential pathways for fostering dialogue and reducing conflict. These insights can help enhance social stability and cohesion in Slovakia during these turbulent times. The data for the following graphs comes from CulturePulse's ARES platform, which monitors global media in near-real-time and includes data as of May 19th.<sup>38</sup>

When analyzing the media in Slovakia, we can see that there are marked increases in events that denote or describe "conflict" or "moves towards conflict." However, there is no significant increase in events denoting and describing "cooperation" or "moves towards peace." Graphs for all four types of events reported in Slovakian media are included below.

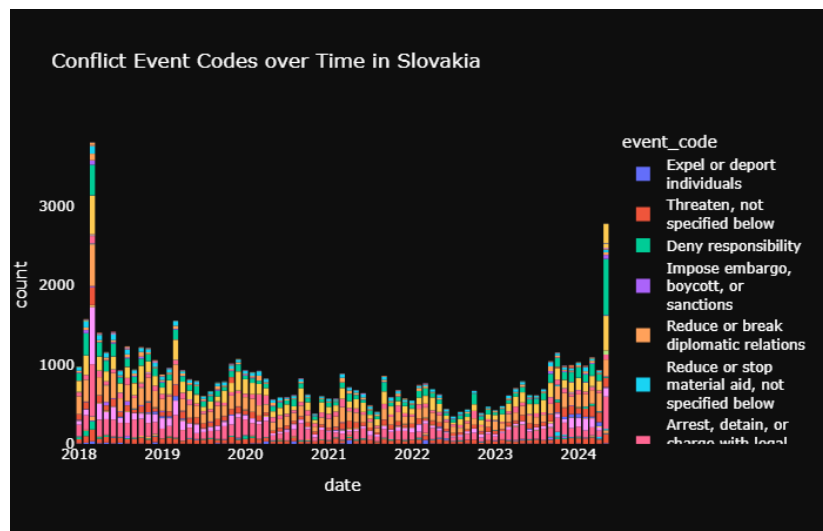


Chart 3: Amount of conflict event codes over time in Slovakia.

### Conflict events

As seen in the graph, various types of conflict events are the highest they've been in Slovakia since the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová in 2018. We are not yet at the end of May, and the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Fico is well on pace to overtake the volume of conflict events surrounding the double murder in 2018.

<sup>37</sup> ARES is a platform developed by CulturePulse that leverages advanced AI and data analytics to provide real-time insights into the socio-political landscape, using a combination of machine learning and multi-agent AI to analyze vast amounts of data from online media and social media networks. If not stated otherwise, it relies on the Google GDELT database for access to the online media.

<sup>38</sup> Data are aggregated on a monthly basis, meaning the "monthly average" is calculated from 1st to 15th of May 2024 for the ELV.ai dataset, and from 1st to 19th of May 2024 for the ARES data.



The two most common themes related to conflict are criticisms and denouncements around the attempted assassination event. The key themes of the 2018 Kuciak murder, on the other hand, were discussions of arrests, demonstrations, and rallies.

### Moves toward conflict

Two most common themes among the events that “move towards conflict,” or suggest negative impacts that can create further conflict related to the attempted assassination of Fico are (1) pessimistic comments that anticipate potential negative outcomes, such as his potential death or the escalation of tensions and violence, and (2) threats of force. In comparison, the two most common themes in 2018 were related to making pessimistic comments and discussions of violent repression (likely due to the nature of the Kuciak murder itself).

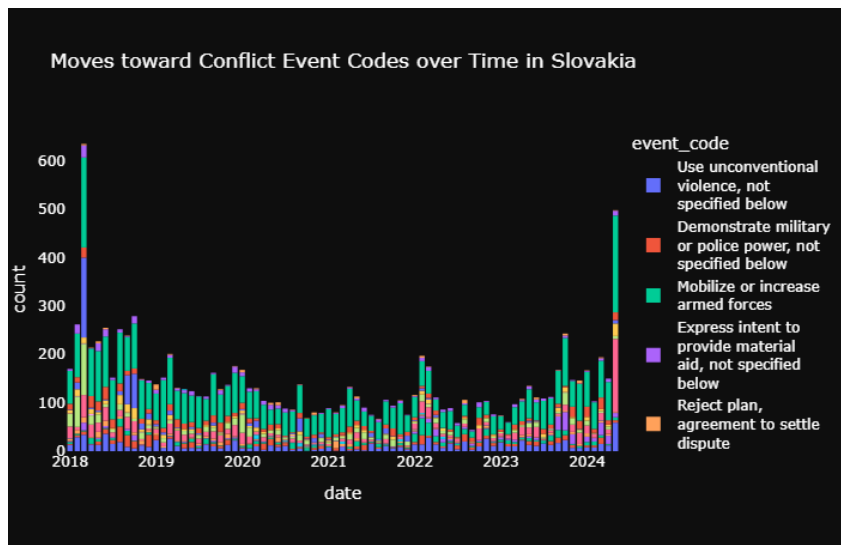


Chart 4: Amount of moves towards conflict event codes over time in Slovakia

However, it is worth noting that the theme of pessimistic comments in the media dominated the narratives in both 2018 and 2024 (so far). In fact, this is the most dominant media narrative over the last several years. If we highlight only reports of pessimistic comments (see figure on the right), we can see that these increase leading up to both the Kuciak murder and the attempted assassination. Notice also that there is a cool down period after the Kuciak murder, which is likely to occur in the remainder of 2024, unless there is a continued escalation.

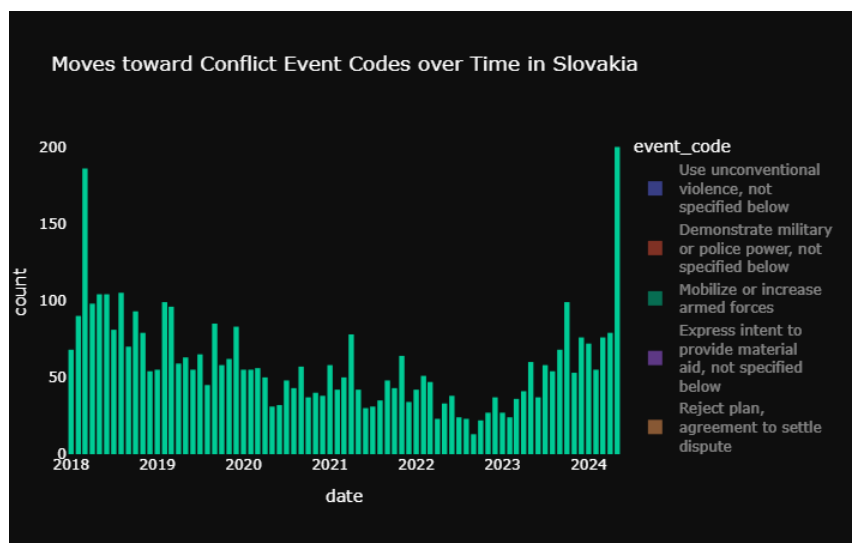


Chart 5: Amount of pessimistic comments over time in Slovakia



## Cooperation events

In addition, the system also tracks events that indicate that there is cooperation between two or more parties. Common themes of cooperation surrounding the attempted assassination are mostly related to consultations, discussions of visitations, and appeals or requests to negotiate. It is worth noting that the variation of events is less concentrated among a few potential actions than conflict events, rather there are more kinds of events being recorded. In other words, the intent to cooperate is clear, but the means by which cooperation might be achieved is not as clear as there are many events occurring at once. In comparison, cooperation signals surrounding the Kuciak murder of 2018 focused on making appeals and requests as well as consultations. This suggests that there was more consensus around the response to the Kuciak murder than the attempted assassination of the PM - demonstrating the polarizing nature of the event even further.

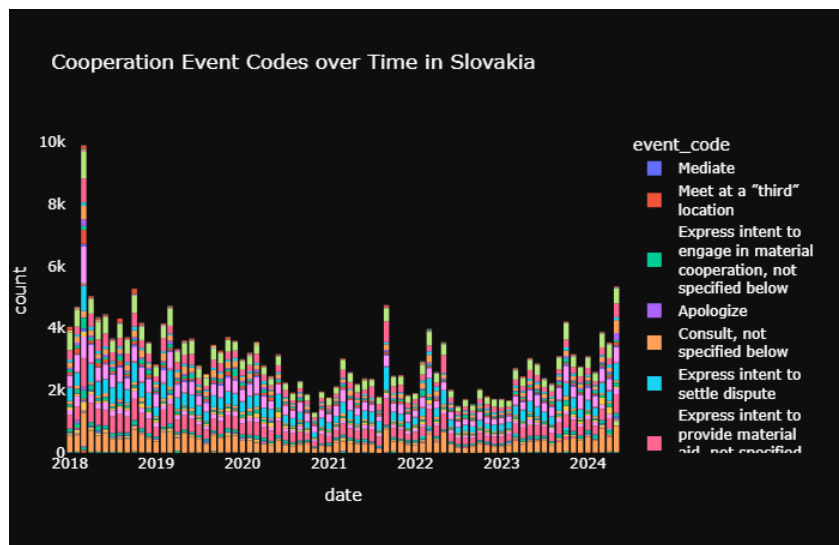


Chart 6: Amount of cooperation event codes over time in Slovakia

## Moves towards peace

Regarding moves towards peace, it is too early to tell what common themes will come in response to the attempted assassination. Currently, the recent news in this category has been dominated by expressions of interest in meeting or negotiating. The country is still in discussion around the event itself and the details surrounding it, and no clear signals of a move towards peace are easily discernible. In the weeks following the Kuciak murder, demands for political reform dominated the narrative, followed by expressions to meet and negotiate.

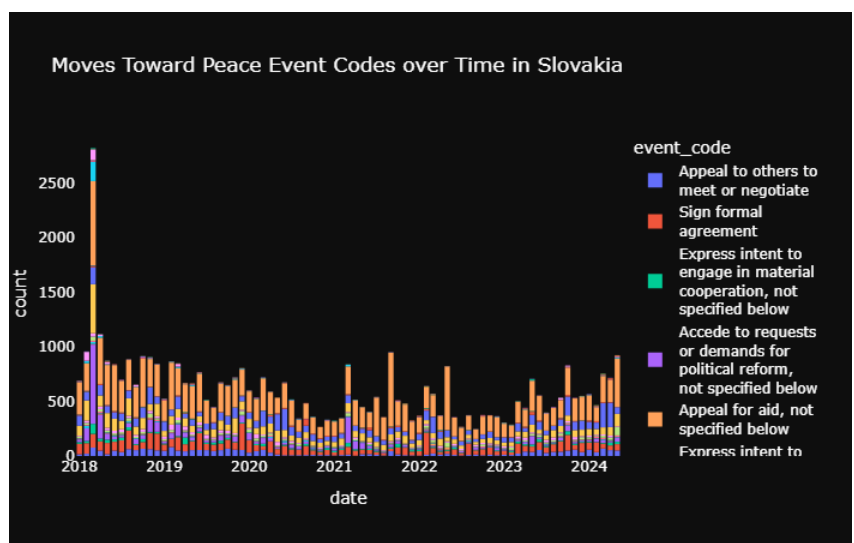


Chart 7: Amount of moves towards peace event codes over time in Slovakia

## CHAPTER 2: WHO “OWNS” THE ASSASSIN? ●

In the aftermath of the recent assassination attempt of the Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico, there was a clash between two opposing narratives found in media, and especially on social networks. On the one side were those who argued that the assassin was a frustrated radicalized liberal progressive. On the other side were those claiming he was a far-right xenophobic nationalist. This polarized attempt to force ideological opponents to “own” the assassin produced confusion in the debates among journalists, politicians, and members of the public alike.

This “blame game” appeared to be largely driven by ideological biases rather than factual analyzes, which intensified polarization (see Chapter 1) and rendered management of the crisis more difficult. The reality is that the would-be assassin’s beliefs were complex and evolved over time.

The radical liberal progressive narrative was supported by several factors. Comments on platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, as well as web-based alternative media outlets such as “Hlavné správy,” “E-report,” and “Info Vojna” have [spread](#) this narrative. They claimed that Cintulas’ act was [politically motivated by](#) opposition parties, specifically [connected](#) to the Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, or linked to the George Soros network. Similarly, some foreign alternative media sources such as Austrian AUF 1 [were spreading](#) this narrative. Moreover, Cintula was a member of the literary club “Rainbow” (“Dúha” in Slovak) and some mistakenly believed the organization to be associated with the LGBT community. Some politicians and media [suggested](#) that the assassination attempt was linked to his support of ideas shared by the opposition and the media, which were very critical of the current government. This fuelled the narrative that the assassin was an opposition voter, most probably a liberal progressive. The support came from claims that Cintula attended protests organized by the opposition. Some sources also shared a photo of Cintula with journalist Martin M. Šimečka, father of the leader of the Progressive Slovakia political party Michal Šimečka. The photo was from an event where Cintula introduced his new book. [According to Demagog.sk](#), the image did not actually involve Martin Šimečka. Another theory [that was spreading](#) on social networks was that the assassination attempt was due to PS propaganda because similar targets of hatred were seen in the status of a former-student of the C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School in Bratislava, whose former-director is Dušan Jaura. Dušan Jaura is the husband of the vice president of PS, Zora Jaurová, this fed the theory.

On the other hand, the far-right, anti-Roma nationalist narrative appealed to several other factors. Cintula wrote a book named Efata: About Gypsies and Roma (“Efata: O Cigánoch a Rómoch” in Slovak) in 2015 which contained derogatory remarks about the Roma community. Moreover, in one of his books, he mentions the actions of racially motivated murderers who targeted Roma people such as Lubomír Harman, who killed his neighbors in a housing estate in Devínská Nová Ves and then shot bystanders, and Milana Juhász, who committed murder in Hurbanov. Specifically he writes: *“According to an unofficial sociological study from 2002, every twenty-third of us is a potential Juhász, every thirty-third a Harman; the danger of acting sparks in tension is alive, because what we all experience is unfair. The organic growth of the parasitic layer must be stopped.”* Secondly, there were several [visual proofs](#) of his past interactions with the controversial paramilitary group “Slovenskí branci”. He was also a member of the Slovak Writer’s Association (“Spolok slovenských spisovateľov” in Slovak), which has a reputation of being a home institution of

many nationalistically-minded writers. Indeed, it has [released a statement](#) after the assassination attempt claiming that *"in this context, all liberal media are accomplices and culprits who indirectly incite citizens ..."*. A member of the board [of the Association](#), who is also a member of the Slovak Parliament representing the Slovak National Party (SNS), Roman Michelko, has been involved in [proposing](#) several legal acts in this election period that critics see as aiming to restrict media freedom and culture in Slovakia. SNS argues that they are balancing extensive liberal bias in these institutions. The Association [has publicly supported](#) these initiatives.

Both interpretations selectively use facts to support their arguments, ignoring the complexities of Cintulas's beliefs and actions. His activities were eclectic and sometimes contradictory. In his book, he praised the Roma intelligentsia and Roma women on several occasions, despite his derogatory remarks. He admired the "Slovenskí Branci" yet founded the *Movement Against Violence*. He attended opposition protests but criticized some opposition leaders. Such contradictions make it clear that simple categorizations are inadequate. However, the flood of information on social media, combined with the pre-existing polarized political climate in Slovakia, led to quick and often biased conclusions. The public had a strong demand for explanations in the first days after the attack, but were left with very little information from the government and hence looked for answers elsewhere.

From the accessible sources, it stands to reason that Cintulas act was politically motivated. In the hours after the assassination attempt, [a video started to circulate](#) on social media where Cintula criticized the government's policies. In the video, which seems to be filmed in the hallway of a police station, he says: *"I do not agree with the government's policy. They eliminated the mass media, why is RTVS being attacked, why is Mazák (note: former chairman of the Judicial Council) fired from his position?"*. This interpretation aligns with the court judgment that was [made available](#) to the media. In it, Cintula cites additional reasons, including the government's legal proposals impacting public service media and culture in Slovakia.

Also considered himself to be a pacifist, which fits his activities at the time. He founded the *Movement Against Violence*, expressing concerns about violence, extremism, and ineffective government responses. The [Facebook page](#) of the *Movement Against Violence* described itself in May 2016 as a new political party: *"The Movement Against Violence is an emerging political party whose goal is to prevent the spread of violence in society. To prevent war in Europe and the spread of hatred."* On the other hand, in [one of his books Cintula describes himself in the introduction as](#): *"He was coming into conflict with state power, he was on the list of inconvenient people. Everywhere he went, he rebelled, and because he was alone, he burned like a torch. He has a social conscience, he is dangerous to those who are dangerous. He is married, has two children, but has not been a good father (he has not seen trees for the forest), and lives and works in Levice."*

As noted above, we know that Cintulas' association with the literary club "Dúha" was misinterpreted. Similarly, from the available information it is most likely that his interactions with the paramilitary group "Slovenskí Branci" were motivated by his admiration for their civic participation and patriotism. He did not approve of their training to use organized force (see Chapter 3). Similarly, the derogatory claims about the Roma minority do not automatically mean Cintula is part of the far right, as this sentiment is relatively wide-spread among the general public in Slovakia. As one of the [experts on the far-right - Tomáš Nociar - explained](#), xenophobia does not equal extreme far right. If it did, then extreme far right would be one of the strongest political streams in Slovakia as well as in many other countries. Czech expert on extremism and terrorism [Miroslav Mareš responds in](#)

[the same vein](#): when asked if Cintula has a clear ideological profile, he responded that Cintula was ideologically eclectic, "... his views varied a lot and were very diffuse."

In conclusion, both prevailing narratives about Juraj Cintula were oversimplified and inaccurate. His beliefs overlapped and developed in time. To understand Cintula and the incident, a more nuanced view is needed. We will have to wait a while for a definitive answer, as law enforcement and forensic psychologists piece the whole picture together. That may take months, if the case of the shooter at the Charles university in Prague from December 2023 is any indication.

## CHAPTER 3: SLOVENSKÍ BRANCI AND THE ASSASSIN ●

Only a few hours after the assassination attempt, Hungarian journalist Szabolcs Pányi from the Central European media project VSquare published on the social media "X" (former Twitter) a [photograph of the would-be assassin Juraj Cintula](#) in the company of members of the Slovenský branci paramilitary group. The story was immediately picked up by [local](#) and international media - from [Britain](#) to [India](#) - and it became a stable part of the story. Seven days later, the X post itself was "retweeted" more than 3200 times and viewed by almost 3 million people.

Investigating any potential links between attempted political assassination and a paramilitary group is important. Paramilitary groups may hold extremist ideologies, or receive funding, training, or support from foreign entities, including state actors seeking to destabilize a country. Tracking these ties is critical to national security and combating foreign interference. Slovenský branci (SB), if judged by their media profile, could fit several of the abovementioned criteria, being [often described as an extremist group](#) by the media. The public interest is thus completely justified.

In reality, they barely fit one of these criteria, namely, existing ties with foreign actors (mostly Russian, later Polish), having received limited training from them. Apart from that, they were always in the category of a potential security threat, as any unregulated paramilitary group is, and not an acute one. They have caused a lot of controversies, ultimately fuelling distrust between them and the state, and damaging their public image beyond repair. However, none of their members was ever prosecuted for any action related to their paramilitary activity, and many locals have come to enjoy their public activities.

## WHO WERE SLOVENSKÍ BRANCI?<sup>39</sup>

Slovenskí Branci was founded in Slovakia in 2012 by four individuals, only one of whom (Peter Švrček) remained in the group to its very end in October 2022. When they founded the group, they were all teenagers and it was a hobby to them. After a short episode (less than a year) of admiration for the controversial wartime Slovak state (a satellite state of Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945) they developed an admiration for anti-Nazi personalities of the Slovak national uprising of 1944 and considered their earlier beliefs as mistakes of their youth.

The most common activity of SB was providing ongoing paramilitary training to Slovak citizens. This typically happened on a bi-weekly basis, culminating with a week-long bootcamp each summer. SB members considered themselves part of a nationalist organization with a mission to revive patriotic traditions of Slovakia - they repaired historical cultural sites, planned remembrance events at graves and monuments of Slovak historical figures, cleaned illegal dump sites, and volunteered at sporting and cultural events (e.g., folklore festivals at local castles). They also regularly joined relief teams during the flood season or winter calamities and participated in search and rescue operations organized by local authorities.

Some of the group's activities were considered highly controversial; such as giving lectures about Slovak history and organizing "defense education" at elementary schools, sending "monitoring squads" to Roma villages in Eastern Slovakia, and patrolling the borders of refugee camps in Slovakia during the refugee crisis of 2015–2016. Perhaps the most controversial was the link to the Night Wolves, a Russian motorbike gang that participated in the 2014 conflict in Crimea and Donbas on the side of Russia. Also worrying were the political ambitions of some of the SB leadership, who would challenge the state's monopoly on violence, mixing paramilitary and legislative capabilities. This eventually failed after a few years.

SB members insisted they were an apolitical, patriotic self-defense organization that emulated the historical and cultural tradition of Slovak volunteer forces that fought for freedom (e.g., the Czechoslovak legions or the anti-fascist partisan fighters of WWII). The political rhetoric of the group resembled U.S. militias such as Three Percenters that state that they do not organize against any concrete enemy. SB wanted to create a self-support network that can be utilized in any type of crisis that might emerge on Slovak territory. They believed that in order for a nation to remain free, it should have an organized self-defense force, arguing that the state should support and not hinder or criminalize such activities. As with other nationalist organizations, self-defense of the homeland and territoriality were critical components of their ideology.

Despite SB being officially apolitical, members did not hide their preference for a mostly anti-Western (often confused as exclusively pro-Russian) and anti-system value set. More recently, the values of nationalism and patriotism have emerged as more prominent. However, how "nationalism" is defined and what is viewed as best for the nation has evolved over time along with changes in the ideology and interpretation of history by the group leadership. Other strong sentiments

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39 This short profile of Slovenskí branci is based on a more detailed one included in: Kosnáč P., Lane J.E., Toft M.D., Shults F.L. (2023) Paramilitaries, parochialism, and peace: The moral foundations and personality traits of Slovenskí Branci. PLoS ONE 18(3): e0281503. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0281503>.

held by a majority of members included suspicion towards what is considered “new” and “foreign” influences brought in by the media and cosmopolitan urban elites, distrust of the EU and NATO, and disgust over the “sunshine mentality” - indicating an overly sensitive and politically correct person, typically aligned with strong liberal and inclusive political views. While many of these values and beliefs appear to align well with the current Russian narrative (e.g., pan-Slavic identities, distrust of NATO), it is important to note that when Russia first invaded Ukraine, SB leadership denounced the invasion as an act of aggression.

This suggests that the SB value set was relatively complex and multifaceted, rather than based on a simplistically polarized political framework. The ideological and value positions of SB members in the later years of their existence were not significantly different from those of the average Slovak population, almost 51% of whom subscribe to anti-system positions.<sup>40</sup> Although the group’s values do have some overlap with that of Russia, ultimately its core value of protecting Slovak sovereignty and security played a more central role in the group’s alignments. Some of the more pro-Russian SB members have paradoxically become some of the staunchest supporters for Ukraine in the Slovak paramilitary subculture after the Russian invasion in February 2022.

## RELATIONSHIP OF SLOVENSKÍ BRANCI AND THE ASSASSIN.

After Pányi published the photograph of Cintula at the SB event from early January 2016, it fuelled the frenetic activity of media and the public to understand Cintula’s motivations, including ascribing these motives to the ideological opponents (see Chapter 2).

Eventually, discrepancies emerged in the interpretation of Cintulas’ statements and the nature of his relationship with the paramilitary group.

In the original post published on the official [SB Facebook page at 14th of January 2016](#), SB uses Cintulas’ statement, praising their “the ability to act without orders from the state”, which he considers admirable in a mostly passive Slovak society. He also praises its members “selfless dedication”, since they invest considerable resources and time in pursuit of their activities without remuneration. He finishes with a rhetorical question, answering it himself:

*“Why do they do it? Hundreds of thousands of migrants are arriving in Europe, of which we are a permanent part. Slovenski branCI are not preparing to fight, but to defend. When anyone tells you that they are preparing for war, do not believe them. Their primary task is to protect the people, the country, the tradition and the culture - they are patriots. I believe in these young boys and girls and I express my public support for them.*

*Juraj Cintula, poet, writer, publicist”*

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<sup>40</sup> Kosnáč, P. & Gloss, H. (2024) [Anti]system na Slovensku. DEKK Institute: Bratislava. See: [www.dekk.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/antisystem-na-slovensku-2023.pdf](http://www.dekk.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/antisystem-na-slovensku-2023.pdf)



After the narrative of a connection between Cintula and SB gained momentum, and was increasingly cited by foreign media, the former SB Chairman, Peter Švrček, provided a public statement for several media, including the Czech magazine Respekt, that he has met Cintula only twice, once in private and once during the public event, where he was photographed, and that Cintula was never a member of SB. He said to Respekt: *"He sent me an email saying that he was a poet and a writer, that he liked our activities and that he would like to recite a poem at one of our events."*

According to Švrček, Cintula tried to persuade the paramilitary leadership to keep the active citizenship activities, but abandon the combat and weapons training. That was not acceptable for a paramilitary group, and their contact ceased organically. The same statement was provided by Švrček on his own initiative to the Slovak Police on 15th of May 2024 in the form of a voluntary statement.

As [reported by media](#), one day after the shooting, on 16th of May, Slovak Minister of Defense and vice-prime minister Robert Kaliňák released a statement indicating that Cintula was a former pacifist that got radicalized, and described his contact with SB in the context mentioned above. This statement was [problematized by other media](#), which cited the above-mentioned Respekt magazine's article to state that Cintula actually praised SB members, not trying to dissuade them from paramilitary activities, which caused some confusion among the members of public.

This discrepancy is most likely only apparent, and it is explained by comparing different sources to which the media had access. Slovak media relied on the released photo by Szabolcz Panyi and on statements by Švrček, a Czech magazine that gained an exclusive access to the previously unpublished audiovisual material filmed by the crew for the HBO Europe documentary "When the War Comes" ("Až přijde válka" in Czech), which documented SB activities between the years 2015-2018. Documentarians filmed the paramilitary group for years, eventually using only what they believed were the most significant parts of the materials, leaving more than a hundred hours of raw footage aside. Respekt magazine used this extra material.

The dispute over content makes it seem as if Cintula only told SB one thing, and there is an ongoing dispute over what it was. In fact, Cintula was in physical contact with SB twice, with the public event lasting several hours, and he wrote a Facebook statement for them. In terms of content presented by Slovak media, Slovak authorities and Czech magazine, these versions are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they fit the profile of a shooter who valued active citizenship, shared the fears of both the SB and part of the Slovak population about the European migration crisis of 2015-2016, and at the same time once espoused pacifism (8 years ago).

Several of the authors of this report have written a [research paper on the moral foundations and psychology of SB](#), and our colleague Pavol Kosnáč has spent hundreds of hours of field research with Central-Eastern European paramilitary groups, majority of which was spent with SB. To the best of our knowledge, Cintula was never a member of SB, despite his short contact with the group. We have never noticed him in any of the paramilitary activities of the group, apart from his single public appearance in January 2016. Our colleague has never encountered him in any of the trainings or other activities of SB during the years. Interviews with basically all core members of the group have been conducted over the years of the field research, and Cintula was never mentioned. It is extremely unlikely we would not encounter him, or a mention of him, during the field research, if he had in fact been a member.



At the same time, the leadership of Slovenskí branci were hungry for recognition, and they were in touch with dozens of individuals whom they believed could provide it. Cintula was one of many, ranging from Jan Čarnogurský, former prime minister of Slovakia, through nationally oriented historians, intellectuals and media personalities, ending with various mid-sized local businessmen. It stands to reason Cintula was simply one of them.

We realize this statement, in contrast to chapters 1 and 2, is not of a scientific nature, but scientists are members of society as well, and our obligation is to contribute to the understanding of reality. Right now, Slovak society is in crisis, and this is our contribution to the clarification of the situation, to the best of our abilities. We can not vouch for all that happened according to Mr. Švrček's statements, but based on everything we know about the group, its membership and organization, Cintula was never a member, and he was not in contact with the group after the 2016.

In the context of the assassination attempt, the connection between Cintula and SB seems to be rather coincidental.

## CONCLUSION ●

This report has focused on understanding societal polarization in Slovakia, analyzing the public sentiment pre- and post-attack on Slovak prime minister Robert Fico, and assessing two main narratives that emerged after the assassination attempt.

**Chapter 1** discussed the high and growing societal polarization in Slovakia. It has increased under almost all governments, so this is not a phenomenon driven by just one political party or just one side of the political spectrum, though the 2019-2023 period has seen the steepest and steadiest growth. The same problem is experienced by our neighbors Hungary and Poland which, together with Slovakia, are the most polarized countries in Europe. However, our neighbors in the Czech republic do not have the same problem. It is thus not possible to simply attribute the growth of polarization to global factors such as side-effects of modern technologies or changes in lifestyle; any nuanced analysis will have to be country specific. The roots of polarization in Slovakia are manifold, ranging from long-term problems with eroded social cohesion or fragmented collective identity caused by Slovakia's complicated history and the side effects of democratic transformation to inefficient government, corruption and a fragmented political elite, whose public manners and rhetoric have grown less civil over the years. This behavior contributed to the tense atmosphere and to the fact that the dominant public sentiments in May 2024 were anxiety, followed by anger. What differed from the other attacks in the region is that typically, attacks that hurt or kill people bring the emotions of sadness and warmth into the forefront, while the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister did not. This suggests that even those who supported the policies of the government, same as those who condemned the attack out of principle had difficulty feeling empathy for the victim. The figures in this chapter illustrate the impact of the high polarization in Slovakia.

**Chapter 2** examined the spread of simplified narratives about Juraj Cintula, especially the attempts to describe him as a champion of a specific ideological group, as a militant xenophobic nationalist by some, and as a radicalized progressive tied to the opposition parties by others. Both of these narratives involve simplifications and derogatory labeling, fitting into the first and second phases of the cycle of polarization. In reality, Cintula's beliefs have been eclectic, mixing different political and philosophical beliefs, which developed over time.

**Chapter 3** focused on the narrative that Juraj Cintula was connected, or even a member, of the now defunct paramilitary group Slovenskí branci (SB). This is part of our unique contribution to clarifying the situation, since several authors of this report studied the group in the past using various methodologies, including long-term field research. We may be mistaken, but to the best of our knowledge, based on extensive interviews with the majority of core members of the group and hundreds of hours of participant observation, Cintula was not a member of the group. Moreover, various statements by the former Chairman of SB Mr. Švrček, Slovak media, Czech media, and Slovak ministries about Cintula are not mutually exclusive - he did praise SB for what he saw as their civic virtues and at the same time tried to persuade them to cease paramilitary training.

## IS THERE A WAY OUT OF POLARIZATION? ●

**Yes.** The process is hard and emotionally painful, as is any activity demanding self-reflection, but it is possible as we can see from the efforts of various groups and nations in the past, including our German neighbors who had to come to terms with the fact that their fellow citizens organized a mass murder on an industrial scale. Germany is a great example of a population that was able to come to terms with the sins of their history and make amends. Today, preventing the rise of another totalitarian political system is a pillar of German collective identity. Another country that was capable of depolarization is Estonia, which successfully appeased its Russian minority and after a generation, only a small percentage of Russian-Estonians feel alienated from the majority of Estonian society, nurturing grievances from the past.<sup>41</sup>

Less positive examples are the Balkans or Northern Ireland, which experienced civil war and long-term violent public unrest, respectively. But even these examples can be a source of inspiration. Some Irish leaders and paramilitary commanders involved in the Good Friday agreement, the process that ended the period of Irish Troubles, a period plagued by political violence, have [shared with some of the authors](#) of this report that they stopped, because everyone was just too tired of fear, hate and killing. If we take this practical experience seriously, it teaches us two things: (1) letting polarization spiral into violence doesn't solve problems, it will only get us into a worse place, where we lose lives, relationships, time and national prosperity and that (2) we don't have to like each other - paramilitary commanders that signed the peace agreements in Ireland or Balkans didn't - we just have to keep it civil.

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41 Kosnáč P. & Gloss H., Súdržnosť na Slovensku: Čo drží krajinu pokope a na čom sa rozpadá?, DEKK Inštitút: Bratislava, p. 246

# RECOMMENDATIONS ●

Here we offer recommendations for lowering the intensity of the current polarization in Slovakia at three different levels. First, at the individual level, there are various shifts in behavior that are possible for everyone. Second, at a national level, we can draw from the experience of others, recognizing that Slovakia is not the first country to face high polarization. Finally, we offer some examples of best practices in terms of immediate actions after the assassinations of top politicians in other European countries in the 21st century.

## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:

Healthy self-reflection can help a person identify the phase he or she is in on the polarization cycle, even though this can be emotionally painful. This pain during the process of self-reflection is caused by the need to maintain a positive self-image, causing collisions with reality. The need for a positive self-image is one of the key characteristics of the human mind. This trait functions as an advocate for the self; its role is to seek arguments in favor of maintaining our psychological well-being and social reputation. In order for our mind to examine whether our beliefs correspond to reality, it needs some rather strenuous training to do so. But the reward is the ability to better understand one's own mental processes and other people's behavior. The result is better relationships, an ability to avoid fanning the flames of polarization, and even a longer life, since [good relationships are the strongest predictor](#) of the latter.

### Behave like an anthropologist.

One can take it as a challenge. Next time one meets someone one strongly disagrees with, pretend he or she is a foreigner from a far-off tribe in Amazon or Asia. Don't argue, arguments have no effect - the advocate in our brain will just spring into action and start fighting to defend its client - the positive self image. Just listen, and ask questions. Anthropologists and field-researchers have long learned that people usually have reasons to behave like they do, and if one understands the perspective of others, even if the perspective is extremely foreign and hard to empathize with, it still allows us to have cordial and friendly relationships.

If it can be done with cannibals or desert tribes, it should be possible with one's next door neighbor.

## NATIONAL LEVEL:

### 1. Promote (guided) intergroup contact

Megacities all around the world have the problem of the clash of cultures, combined with extreme individualism. They combat it by supporting neighborhoods, that is, formal and informal groups that look after their neighborhoods and create events where neighbors can spend time together. 'guided contact' in this case means that if there are groups in the neighborhood who may find contact difficult - for example, for ethnic or religious reasons - it helps if the contact is not spontaneous,

but initiated by a third party - a guide, or a facilitator - who is trusted by both parties. And it works. People are nicer to each other, it reduces crime and polarization. And since evolutionary and group instincts are shared by all humans - similar patterns apply to politicians. Elite polarization exists partly due to the limited physical contact elites have with each other in a non-conflict environment. A nice case study is politicians in the US. In the past, their lives overlapped outside of work, their children went to the same schools, and they met at sporting events. Today, they live mostly outside of Washington and only fly in for a few days a week, since their entire private lives take place outside of the capital. This is one reason why the US Congress and Senate have turned into one of the most polarized political bodies among Western democracies.

Fostering opportunities for sustained, meaningful interactions between members of opposing political groups could involve initiatives such as (1) Citizens' assemblies (known i.e. [from Ireland](#)) or deliberative forums where representative citizens from across the political spectrum come together to discuss and find common ground on key issues, or (2) community programs that bring together people of different political leanings to work on shared goals such as neighborhood improvement projects. Psychologists have long known that the easiest way to build friendships across ideologies is through [shared activities and hobbies](#).

## **2. Take perspective**

Self-reflection that has to be done on an individual level, can be facilitated by the state and civil society on a national level. Helping citizens try to understand the viewpoints and experiences of those on the other side of the political divide can (1) be part of public education campaigns featuring stories/narratives that humanize the "other side" and highlight areas of common ground, and (2) be part of the permanent curricula in schools that teach perspective-taking skills and expose students to diverse viewpoints on issues. Employers will thank schools for [fostering similar soft skills](#).

## **3. Address Root Grievances**

Policymakers should implement policies and reforms to address the socioeconomic and cultural grievances that make segments of the population susceptible to polarizing narratives. In the Slovak situation, this could include measures to reduce inequality between regions, expand opportunity, address relevant frustrations of segments of the population that were actually economically or socially damaged by democratic transformation, address the problem of disinformation, brain drain, pension system and the mental health of the youth caught by the COVID lockdown and social media addiction.

This undertaking is the most complex of all of the recommendations, and it will need an interdisciplinary approach, enough data, the ability to interpret the data correctly, strong cooperation between experts, practitioners and policymakers, and the political will to fix the roots of the problems that may require unpopular reforms. But if done properly, Slovakia can begin to heal toxic divisions and restore a healthier societal atmosphere.

#### 4. Lead by example.

Influential leaders and public figures should vocally condemn polarizing language, dehumanizing rhetoric, and hateful speech from their own groups or political parties. The internal signal must be clear - such behavior is unacceptable within their "in-group".

Even a very successful intervention in one or more categories described above will not be enough, if the most visible and the most powerful people in the country - democratically elected politicians, and to certain extent other social elites - won't behave civilly. They should also practice intergroup (interparty) contact and perspective taking. This can help to prevent the mutual hate that was palpable across some Slovak political parties in recent years, leading to direct physical altercations on several occasions, transferring this hate onto some of their voters.

Politicians and other social elites have the largest responsibility for the social atmosphere in a country. If they don't participate in depolarization, no intervention will be strong enough.

### BEST PRACTICES AFTER AN ASSASSINATION ●

We have reviewed reactions of political elites and civil service after four assassinations that have taken place in Europe in the 21st century, namely Serbian prime minister [Zoran Đinđić](#) in March 2003, Swedish minister of foreign affairs [Anna Lindh](#) in September 2003, and British members of parliament [Jo Cox](#) in June 2016 and [David Amess](#) in October 2021.

In all cases, political campaigning was aborted for several days. Assassination is seen as an attack on democratic society, requiring unity, not political campaigning. Symbols are important in a time of crisis, and joint statements by all political parties usually came in a matter of a few short days, showing that despite different views on applied policies, there are some ideals and values that are shared by everyone. Stable democracies typically do not declare a state of emergency, nor do they assume emergency powers. The Serbian case was an exception - a state of emergency was declared by the president, though Serbia was just recovering from the civil war and the state of its democracy was rather shaky. Letters and proclamations of support and solidarity from foreign leaders poured into the country and helped stabilize the situation. Since in the cases above the assassination was successful, other symbolic gestures, such as national donations for the favorite charity of the deceased was organized, and in Britain, all political parties made a gentleman's agreement not to field candidates against the victims home party in the next elections in his home district, demonstrating that the assassination has achieved the exact opposite goal that was intended.

Many steps taken by political elites in the analyzed cases had similarities with the aftermath of the attempted assassination in Slovakia. Political parties ceased political activities, and Slovak opposition parties postponed or aborted scheduled anti-government protests and political campaigns for the European parliament. The purpose of cessation of political activity is to stop tensions, avoid making decisions under emotional pressure - either personal or public - and make time for symbolic gestures and statements, which demonstrates the gravity of the situation. Many standard media have also turned off the comments section to prevent spread of disinformation and accusations.

What all the attacks on politicians that were managed well, and that did not escalate into a wider social tension or violence, have in common is a symbolic and timely demonstration of unity by the political elites and refusal to use violence to solve political disputes.

From the point of view of crisis communication, reactions of Slovak political elites were a mixed bag. Some, such as one of the leaders of the coalition parties, Minister of Defense Robert Kaliňák **called** for the calming of passions and the cessation of hatred. Opposition leaders of PS, KDH and SaS did the same and **called off** the anti-government protests. Actions of others rather contributed to the social tension, such as the deputy speaker of the Slovak parliament and member of SMER Ľuboš Blaha, who **blamed** media and opposition for the attack, Minister of Interior Matúš Šutaj Eštok who **said** that Slovakia is on the cusp of civil war, or leader of the SNS party Andrej Danko, who **stated** that a “political war is starting, ... and we will not be holding back anymore”.

In this regard, the largest lost opportunity for an even stronger symbolic gesture was not accepting an invitation to participate in the round table that was called for by the incumbent **president Zuzana Čaputová and the president elect Peter Pellegrini**. This gesture would be very powerful, because it would come when most needed - in the first days after the attack, and it would have shown the symbolic unity of the political elites in the time of crisis. Unfortunately, in the emotionally tense situation, members of the Slovak National Party (SNS) and “The Direction Party” (SMER-SSD) **were not willing to participate**. The gesture would have been powerful, since the last time all Slovak political elites were able to unite in this way was 21 years ago, which led to the only successful referendum in Slovakia about European Union accession. This demonstrates how powerful such symbolic gestures can be, and it is a lost opportunity that could have helped calm the situation and prevent the escalation of polarization.

In this context, the most important gesture of Slovak political elites was the acceptance of the **resolution no. 295** of the National council of the Slovak republic, when all 130 present members of parliament voted unanimously to denounce the assassination attempt and the general use of violence and spread of hate. Resolution was accepted on 21st of May, a week after the attack.

Another opportunity with similar symbolic power could emerge when prime minister Rober Fico recovers. His first gestures will spin the cycle of polarization in the country - they will either escalate or deescalate the situation.

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