

First Two Elections to the European Parliament in Slovakia: Turnout and Results in Regional Perspective

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Abstract

Elections to the European Parliament represent a legitimate tool in the hands of citizens of European Union member states, which allows them to participate straight in shaping the political direction of the Community. However, this power is understood and used differently not only at national but also at the regional level. The goal of presented contribution is to offer a specific spatial view on results of the European elections held in Slovakia after accession to the European Union in 2004, while the main objective of the study is to comprehend the geographical aspects of achieved turnout and poll results of crucial political parties, which succeeded in these elections. However, a central aim of work is to present an analysis of geo-preferential movements of political parties between 2004 and 2009 just for this type of election, as well as to draw attention to their common strength and its spatial pattern on the basis of their affiliation to political factions of the European Parliament. Increased emphasis is put on inter-regional comparison of electoral support expressed by inhabitants of particular parts of Slovakia towards the most powerful political parties at the domestic political scene. A link between disaggregated electoral outcomes and the specifics of regional socio-economic situation creates a space for reflection on the causes of given geographic mosaic of election results in terms of the broader context of voter behaviour showed by inhabitants of the particular areas.

Keywords

elections to the European parliament, political parties, turnout, election results, regional level

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Introduction

European Parliament elections deserve only marginal attention within the Slovak political science and sociological research so far. At the same time, we cannot say about geographic perspective at issue of these ballots in current Slovak conditions at all. This situation is partly due to a very short experience with this type of polls in the case of the Slovak Republic, but also because of the nature of European elections perceived by society and academia in this post-socialist country.

Elections to the European Parliament held between 2004 and 2009 were the first in which Slovak citizens could express their views on the functioning and future direction of the European Union and choose the country's first representatives in legislative assembly of this community. There have been issued only minimum professional publications connected with European elections in Slovakia so far. European Parliament Information Office in Slovakia having a seat in Bratislava works towards the promotion of European institutions including European Parliament and provides information on European Union as a whole. However, its activities are focused on the support, promotion and awareness of ordinary citizens about the importance of the idea of European integration and the existence of the European Union itself.

Slovak scholars involved in political science have been paid only a minor attention to this type of polls so far. In particular, the political science and sociological evaluation of various aspects of the European Parliament elections have been highlighted by Gyárfášová and Velšic (2004), Mesežnikov (2004), Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová and Kollár (2009), Macháček (2009) and Bilčík (2009). However, this kind of analysis lacks significant geographical dimension, identification, evaluation and justification of which would help to understand the political consequences and solutions arising from the default redistribution of forces in European Parliament through the voting decisions expressed by citizens of the European Union.

Sociologists Gyárfášová and Velšic (2004) enriched Slovak political science research by the analysis that pays attention to voting behaviour of Slovak electorate and campaign effects in the case of the first ever European elections held in Slovakia in 2004. The authors evaluate their results in the broader social and political context, which stem from both the current social situation prevailing in Slovak society and perception of European significance of these ballots by Slovak citizens. European Election Study 2004 represents a database used for the needs of this research, which thanks to a common methodology enables correct comparison of election results between European Union member states. In publication from Mesežnikov et al. (2009) dedicated to European and presidential elections taking place two years ago as the most important socio-political events of 2009 in Slovakia is depicted the impact of the results of these polls on both the further development of Slovak society and the redistribution of forces in the Slovak political scene. Perception of their organization, progress and final results from the side of European institutions just highlights a supranational importance of European elections and the result of them poses a political commitment of Slovakia towards the European Community at the same time. The most important aspects of the electoral campaign in particular ballots, social moods of public, which decisively shaped the political issues and election programs of political parties involved in the fight for seats in European parliament in 2009, as well as role of the media and their influence on the character of pre-election climate in the country are properly highlighted in mentioned work. The situation from the perspective of professional interest in multi-disciplinary research on results of elections to the European Parliament and their context is much better in neighbouring Czech Republic. This issue is analysed in depth by Šaradín (2004), Pitrová (2007), Linek and Lyons (2008) and Sokol (2009).

Sokol (2009) responded to the growing influence of the European Parliament and its composition in the issue of internal and external policies of the European Union by overview on European elections held until now. In his work, Author comments on the results of the ballots held since 1979, not only from the positions of the participating countries and their contributions to the composition of the European Parliament, but he does not also forget to mention the socio-political factors that significantly affected the final election results across particular countries and consequently determined the nature and development of the composition in legislature of the European Community and policies of its various political factions.

The main objective of this contribution is to offer a specific view on the elections to the European Parliament conducted in Slovakia after joining the European Union in 2004, while the primary benefit of the study would be the understanding of geographical aspects in reached turnout and electoral outcomes of key political parties that succeeded in these polls. We will follow their electoral support with the participation level of citizens in the elections at two different spatial levels—national and regional. We will not also forget to name specifics that create territorial scheme of electoral participation and voting patterns in Slovakia and we will try to identify the factors that cause shape of this spatial mosaic, too. One of the primary tasks of this research is to acquaint the reader with a spectrum of political parties that tried to attract the Slovak electorate in European Parliament elections of 2004 and 2009 and which of them offered the most successful candidates finally selected as representatives of Slovakia in the European Parliament. However, the central goal of this study is to analyse the geo-preferential shifts of particular political parties between 2004 and 2009 precisely for this type of ballots and to emphasize their common strength and its spatial pattern based on their affiliation to political factions of the European Parliament, as well. The cardinal emphasis will be placed on interregional comparison of electoral support expressed by inhabitants of particular parts of Slovakia towards the most powerful parties in the domestic political scene. It can be assumed that Smer-SD as the most vital political party of the first decade of 21st century in Slovakia had been able to radically improve its election results between 2004 and 2009 across all eight regions under study, despite the peculiarities related to the second-order character of European Parliamentary ballots.

Theoretical and Methodological Background

Electoral geography as a dynamically evolving sub-discipline of political geography (Taylor and Johnston 1979) has been reflecting on the issue of elections to the European Parliament and its spatial context since the end of the seventies of the last century when direct election of member states representatives to legislative body of the European Union was introduced. The development of this discipline specially oriented to the European issues and territorially conditioned response of individual countries (or regions located within) has been indelible affected by British political geographer R. J. Johnston. Among other issues, he has noticed the process of delegation and distribution of powers to individual member states grouped in the European Union legislative body and its various factions depending on the size of country's population, already from the moment of transfer the power into the citizens' hands (Johnston 1977; Johnston 1983; Taylor and Johnston 1978). As other authors previously (Katz 1973; Bartolini and Mair 1990), he along with McLean (McLean and Johnston 2009) highlights the differences existing between countries in application of distinct systems transmitting votes to mandates that decisively affects delegation of representatives to the particular political group formed in the European Parliament. At the turn of the millennium, Kovács drew attention to the peculiarities of the electoral behaviour concerning the "new" population of Europe (of countries from the former Eastern Bloc). He evaluated specifics in political decisions of electorate from post-socialist part of Europe emerged after 1989 with respect to geographical factors substantially affecting the distribution of political power in a given spatial context (Kovács and Dingsdale 1998; Kovács 1999; Kovács 2001).

Within the Anglo-Saxon concept on evaluation of European election, there exists an agreement on existence of two theoretical approach for examining the causes and consequences of electoral choices in relation to the European Parliament elections. Traditional and alternative views on the role of these ballots have their rational justification.

For traditional approach (the perception of European elections as the second-order national elections) there is a clear evidence that in the case of five European elections held up to 1999, the bigger parties lost their votes in European elections in comparison with polling to the national parliament, which preceded them, and vice versa, the smaller ones made rather better election result (Reif 1984; van der Eijk, Franklin and Oppenhuis 1996; Marsh 1998; Marsh 2003; Marsh 2006; Kousser 2004; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004). After the first ever direct elections to the European Parliament, Reif and Schmitt (1980) analysed the electoral behaviour of voters in all nine European Union member states. Their main finding was that electorate behaved quite differently in these elections than in the case of elections to national

parliaments. In national elections, voters tended to favour the large parties to avoid the loss of their vote. However, they cast votes for their first preference in the European Parliament elections, which resulted in either a higher percentage of invalid votes or loss of the ruling parties. Later, Reif (1997) paid attention to the lack of comprehension concerning the impact of domestic factors on the results of the European elections. Moreover, Marsh (1998) found that the perception of European elections as the second-order national ballots is more pronounced in those countries, which are accustomed to regular rotation of governments from opposite poles of the political spectrum. Heath showed that in the case of United Kingdom the popularity of the government plays a greater role for the European elections when compared to municipal ballots (Heath et al. 1999). Kousser (2004) also argues that a significant part of the decline in government support in the European elections can be explained by economic performance of the country (Marsh 2006). After the European Union enlargement covering the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, Koepke and Ringe (2006), and Hix and Marsh (2007) as well, tested the theory of second-order polls on the occasion of The 2004 European Parliament elections. Although other authors do not agree with all conclusions of this theoretical concept, they admit the statement on less favourable election results of government and major parties in Western European countries (Bakker and Polk 2009).

Evidence supporting an alternative approach, i. e. understanding the European dimension of these polls is less clear and convincing. Reports concerning elections to the European Parliament in the EU Member States emphasize very often the importance of Europe in the everyday life of people. Even in the case of European elections in Denmark in 1994 (Worre 1996; Nielson 2001), France (Ysmal and Cayré 1996; Howarth 2001) and the UK in 1999 (Mather 2001), European integration was seen as a key factor explaining program shifts of participating political parties. Ferrara's and Weishaupt's publication (2004) is considered as probably the most comprehensive study focusing on the importance of the "European dimension" of the European Parliament elections using aggregate data. However, according to these authors, the impact of understanding of the European elections as an opportunity to comment on the idea of European integration is only marginal towards the final poll results.

Although Pacek's et al. study (2009) is not intended to European Parliament elections (often bearing the epithet of "the second(-order) national elections"), its significance lies in the critical view of Anglo-Saxon political science on current electoral processes taking place behind the former "Iron Curtain". In this contribution, authors wonder to what extent are the turbulence in turnout in national ballots connected with the development of economic and social conditions in the countries of the former Eastern bloc after 1989. For this purpose, they set out three hypotheses, the first of which declares that the turnout in parliamentary and presidential elections is the lower, the worse situation in terms of current political and economic conditions a country is in. Conversely, the second hypothesis states that the less favourable the economic and socio-political situation is, the more motivated to change status to better through participation in ballots the citizens of the state are. The last third hypothesis highlights the importance of particular polls in relation to turnout, which was ultimately marked by authors themselves as the most decisive factor influencing the participation rate of citizens in the plebiscite. The analysis is concentrated on 137 presidential and Parliament elections in total carried out in 19 post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia. In Anglo-Saxon literature on political science, there exists also the bulk of studies primarily concentrated on political apathy of electorate, turnout and phenomenon of non-voters considered decisive mainly in the case of elections having problems with low level of voters' participation (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974; Kleppner 1982; Teixeira 1992; Denver 1995; Rose 1995; Schram and Sonnemans 1996; Schmitt and Eijk 2001; Feddersen 2004; Hillygus 2005; Bernhagen and Marsh 2007; Franklin and Hobolt 2011; also Linek 2013)

Database of Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic poses data platform for the purposes of this research focusing on European elections results at different hierarchical levels of spatial units of Slovakia concerning mentioned polls carried out between 2004 and 2009. Overall results of the ballots for different political parties, which participated in those elections, characterise national level of this issue. The regional level of spatial units is seen in this study as NUTS 3 level, which is created by eight regions of Slovakia. Turnout in percentage terms defining the relative number of eligible voters participating in given polls, election results of political parties in relative terms and percentage point change of

turnout/results between considered ballots defined in this case as the arithmetic difference between electoral outcomes expressed in relative terms for two points in time (elections in 2004 and 2009) represent quantitative measures, by which we will describe the particular polls on the basis of their results. Graphic outputs presented in this work will be focused on turnout and election results of two preferably strongest political parties of the then Slovak political spectrum—SDKÚ as both the strongest right-wing party from the long-term perspective and also the winner of the European Parliament elections in 2004 in Slovakia, and Smer-SD as both the strongest Slovak political party at all declaring social-democratic values and the winner of European elections in Slovakia in 2009. Using the graph interpretation means, we will also notice the common power of the parties falling under the two most powerful political factions within the European policy in terms of support declared by Slovak electorate—the Socialists and Christian Democrats.

Results

Twenty seven parties in total have attended the European Parliament elections in Slovakia so far, while in 2004 17 Slovak political parties, movements or electoral coalitions were competing in the first ballots of this kind ever, and five years later by one political party less (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1: List of Slovak political parties taking part in elections to the European Parliament in 2004 and 2009 (Register of Political Parties ... 2015)

Abbreviation	Slovak name	English translation
ANO	Aliancia Nového Občana	Alliance of the New Citizen
ASV	Agrárna strana vidieka	Agrarian and Countryside Party
AŽ-OS	Aktívne ženy – OS Slovenska	Active Women – Axis of Slovakia
DS	Demokratická strana	Democratic Party
DÚ	Demokratická únia	Democratic Union
HZD	Hnutie za demokraciu	Movement for Democracy
KDH	Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie	Christian Democratic Movement
KDS	Konzervatívni demokrati Slovenska	Conservative Democrats of Slovakia
KSS	Komunistická strana Slovenska	Communist Party of Slovakia
LIGA	Liga	League
ĽS-HZDS	Ľudová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko	People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
ĽÚ	Ľudová únia	People's Union
MFS	Maďarská federalistická strana	Hungarian Federalist Party
Misia 21	Misia 21	Mission 21
OKS	Občianska konzervatívna strana	Civic Conservative Party
P SNS	Pravá Slovenská národná strana	True Slovak National Party
RKDH	Rómske kresťanské demokratické hnutie	Romany Christian Democratic Movement
SaS	Sloboda a Solidarita	Freedom and Solidarity
SDKÚ-DS	Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – Demokratická strana	Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party
SDL	Strana demokratickej ľavice	Party of the Democratic Left
SF	Slobodné fórum	Free Forum
SĽS	Slovenská ľudová strana	Slovak People's Party
Smer-SD	Smer – sociálna demokracia	Direction – Social Democracy
SMK-MKP	Strana maďarskej koalície – Magyar Koalíció Pártja	Party of the Hungarian Coalition
SNS	Slovenská národná strana	Slovak National Party
SZ	Strana zelených	Green Party
ŽS SR	Živnostenská strana Slovenskej republiky	Craftsmen Party of Slovakia

In 2004, 714,508 people of total 4,210,463 eligible voters arrived in Slovakia on the occasion of European elections to the polls that represented a very low turnout at level of nearly 17%. This was absolutely the lowest value among all 25 European Union member states, in which the European Parliament elections held in 2004. The average turnout was for the whole community at 45.47%,

in the case of the Visegrad Group (V4—Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) with a similar political and social history it reached an average of only 24.57%. Poland, a member state with the second lowest turnout in these ballots, however registered in this indicator by almost four percentage points better outcome than Slovakia. Where should we look for the reasons for such a low turnout of Slovak electorate? Sociologists Gyarfašová and Velšic (2004) depict several factors standing behind this unflattering title. In the case of Slovak citizens we may talk about some sort of lack of interest in European affairs, electoral year replete with many ballots and polling taking place in one day. However, political parties have at least an equal share of the blame for this international fiasco as voters themselves. Their attitude towards these polls could be characterized as relatively tepid and they tagged them indirectly for the elections of “secondary importance”, what corresponds to candidate list for Members of Parliament (MEPs) introduced to the public. Another reason that the authors consider as one of the key in order to justify such a low turnout, is the lack of thematic conflict between different political parties in the ballot campaign in relation to the European dimension of policy. Not only political parties failed in explaining the importance of citizen participation in European Parliament elections, but the media and NGOs, too.

Despite the aforementioned extremely low turnout, a right-wing SDKÚ (now SDKÚ-DS) became the overall winner of these polls, which however won a very close only and just before the three political rivals. SDKÚ acquired 17.09% of the votes, LS-HZDS 17.04%, Smer-SD 16.89% and KDH 16.19% of all valid votes casted in elections (Table 2). All four mentioned parties gained the three seats in the European Parliament and party of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia, SMK-MKP, whose profit 13.24% was sufficient to fill two seats in the legislature of the European Union, added the set of successful parties in this ballots (Slovak Republic regarding their population size had right to occupy 14 chairs of 785-seat European Parliament by their representatives in that period). Other participating political parties received electoral support under 5% and thus their candidates did not take positions in the European Parliament. On the basis of their political orientation, triple of successful parties (SDKÚ, KDH and SMK-MKP) was included in political faction of European People's Party (EPP-ED), three MEPs for Smer-SD were added to European Socialists and the successful candidates for LS-HZDS were affiliated to a group of non-attached Members (NI), since party had not yet been accepted into the European group of political parties till then. Right-wing liberal ANO and communist KSS remained just before conquering the limit of 5% needed to gain a mandate in European Parliament.

Five years later, turnout in European Parliament elections in Slovakia had slightly increased reaching level of 19.64%. However, this figure was the lowest one in the entire European Union again and if a huge decrease in electoral participation of voters in Lithuania (from 48.38% in 2004 to 20.98% in 2009) was not registered there, the difference in turnout between the Slovak Republic and Poland, thus countries with the lowest interest in ballots in 2004, would be increased to nearly five percentage points. In 2009 European Parliament elections, Poland was country with the third lowest voter participation of electorate just after Slovakia and Lithuania. The average turnout in the European Union was at level of 43%, in the case of the countries grouped in Visegrad Four it reached 26.58%. The reasons that caused such an enormously low interest in European Parliament elections in Slovakia we have discussed about in paragraph concerning the previous polls, and we may conclude that similar socio-political factors came into play even in 2009. Although turnout in European Parliament elections in Slovakia inter-electorally slightly increased, however in recent European polls it did not reached even threshold of 20%, which included analysed country on the tail of the “27” in this indicator again. This increase in voter participation, concretely by more than 2.5%, is still slightly faster in comparison with the level of V4 countries (2.01%) and also with the EU member states, where the interest in these ballots expressed by participation of electorate in ballots between 2004 and 2009 decreased in average by almost 2.5%. Nevertheless, minimal interest of Slovak citizens in European elections remains a very serious socio-political problem of Slovakia and considering the extremely low turnout, more rapid growth in turnout than was achieved in 2009 would be expected.

The 2009 Elections to the European Parliament in Slovakia in terms of electoral gain and acquirement of the parliamentary seats in the legislature of the European Union were dominated by the party of Smer-SD. It won with total gain of 32.01% of the votes, and in comparison with the first ever European

elections held in Slovakia in 2004 its electoral outcome in terms of the relative number of votes was nearly doubled (in 2004 reached 16.89%). For the party, this electoral support meant the occupation of five seats in European Parliament—by two seats more than five years earlier. While the previous ballots of this type were characterized by great balance of political rivals, when four the most successful competing subjects showed similar election score and their mutual differences in electoral support were less than one per cent, polling in 2009 meant a clear win of Robert Fico's party. SKDÚ-DS was ranked in second place with a loss of more than 15 percentage points after the winner of these polls, although its election result was actually identical to that reached five years ago. Party won two seats like the SMK-MKP and KDH did, but the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) recorded by 5% lower number of votes than in 2004. On the basis of poll results, representative was sent to the European Parliament also by the nationalist SNS, which just exceeded the threshold of 5% needed to gain a mandate. Its votes increased inter-electorally by more than 3.5%, which can be explained by the party unification carried out in 2005. In 2004, SNS ran in coalition with PSNS, with which it rejoined one year later. Despite the gain of one parliamentary seat, ES-HZDS can be described as loser of the European elections held in Slovakia in 2009. Vladimír Mečiar's party reached by eight percentage points worse electoral outcome than in 2004 ballots representing only about half electoral gain in comparison with the voting support in the first ever elections to the European Parliament in Slovak Republic. Despite the low voter interest in this polling, the ballot results just confirmed the long-term trends occurring in the support of Slovak political parties in the second half of the previous decade. As well as in all other types of elections (local, regional and national), even in those to the European Parliament, the rapid growth of Smer-SD's support within the population on the one hand and the inevitable decline of the LS-HZDS reaching a peak in the 2010 Parliament elections on the other have been confirmed.

Positive point for the party of Vladimír Mečiar was at least its acceptance by the political faction of European Liberals and Democrats (ALDE). Representatives from the winning party of Smer-SD were roofed by the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S & D) and successful candidates of right-wing parties (SDKU, KDH and SMK-MKP) joined the European People's Party (EPP). The representative of the Slovak Republic for the SNS strengthened the right-wing Euro-sceptics (EFD) within the legislature of the European Union. As in 2004, also five years later, the mandate was not gained by right-wing liberal party—SAS this time. It missed by less than half a percentage point better election result to occupy the seat in European Parliament by its deputy.

As it was declared earlier, the central task of this work is to inspect the results of elections to the European Parliament through both the spatial analysis of turnout typical of Slovak citizens and their voting support expressed to the strongest political parties. With regard to the stated aim of this contribution, comprehension of the geographical changes in poll results on different spatial scales will be crucial. Overall results of European elections conducted in Slovakia in 2004 and 2009 have been already briefly introduced. Their regional specifics are at least as interesting as the nationwide results. The pleasing news is that interest in the ballots of this type has increased in all regions of Slovakia (level NUTS 3), but growth in turnout is less positive, because in neither one of them was too strong. In this sense, we can hardly talk about more significant regional peculiarities, since the difference in the electoral participation of the population ranged from 1.5 to 3.5 percentage points (see Figure 1). Turnout has increased fastest in central and western part of Slovakia, especially in Banská Bystrica, Nitra, Trnava and Trenčín region, where an interest in the elections expressed by electoral participation of the population grew by more than three percentage points in 2009. On the contrary, the smallest rate of growth has been recorded in the east, where the increase of electoral participation in Košice and Prešov region did not reach two percentage points. Despite these gains in turnout, Bratislava region (23.08%) was the area with the highest interest in European elections (similarly to situation five years ago), the smallest percentage of people (as in 2004) was attracted to the polls by election at the opposite end of the country—in the Košice region (17.33%). In general, we can declare that the slightly higher interest in elections to the European Parliament has been observed in central and western part of Slovakia, while the East is characterised by a lower electoral participation of the population. The same geographical regularity applies even in growth rate of turnout, which creates a possible opportunity to discuss in future how to promote the growth of turnout in those parts of the country that suffer the most from

enormously low interest in ballots, especially in those called European. However, it is questionable whether it is in Slovak conditions possible to determine a generally valid socio-political factor that would be able to cause the different development of regions in terms of their voter participation in European Parliament elections.

Table 2: Results of Slovak political parties in elections to the European Parliament in period of 2004–2009

	2004			2009			Difference 09/04
	%	NM in EP	PG in EP	%	NM in EP	PG in EP	%
Number of eligible voters	4,210,463 (abs.)	x	x	4,345,773 (abs.)	x	x	135,310 (abs.)
Turnout	16.97	x	x	19.64	x	x	2.67
SDKÚ-DS	17.09	3.00	EPP-ED	16.98	2.00	EPP	-0.11
ĽS-HZDS	17.04	3.00	NI	8.97	1.00	ALDE	-8.07
Smer-SD	16.89	3.00	PES	32.01	5.00	SD	15.12
KDH	16.19	3.00	EPP-ED	10.87	2.00	EPP	-5.32
SMK-MKP	13.24	2.00	EPP-ED	11.33	2.00	EPP	-1.91
KSS	4.54	0.00	x	1.65	0.00	x	-2.89
SF	3.25	0.00	x	1.57	0.00	x	-1.68
SNS. P SNS*	2.01	0.00	x	5.55	1.00	EFD	3.54
OKS**	1.00	0.00	x	2.10	0.00	x	1.10
ANO	4.65	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
HZD. ĽÚ	1.69	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
AŽ-OS	0.70	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
RKDH	0.69	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
ŽS SR	0.35	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
MFS	0.22	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
DÚ	0.19	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
SL'S	0.17	0.00	x	a	x	x	x
SaS	a	x	x	4.71	x	x	x
SZ	a	x	x	2.11	x	x	x
SDL'	a	x	x	0.62	x	x	x
ASV	a	x	x	0.45	x	x	x
Misia 21	a	x	x	0.42	x	x	x
DS	a	x	x	0.29	x	x	x
LIGA	a	x	x	0.28	x	x	x

Notes: abs.: absolute number, EP: European Parliament, NM in EP: Number of members in EP, PG in EP: Political group in EP, EPP-ED: European People's Party: European Democrats, NI: Non-inscrits, PES: Party, EPP: European People's Party, ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, S & D: Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, EFD: Europe of Freedom and Democracy, a: absence, x: contradiction, *) in elections 2009 SNS only, **) in elections

As mentioned earlier, the right-wing SDKÚ (current SDKÚ-DS) became a slight winner of the first ever European elections held in Slovakia. The mosaic of its regional gains brings several specific trends (Figure 3). Elections to the European Parliament in 2009 just confirmed the long-term position of the capital city's region (Bratislava) with the highest GDP per capita and the highest proportion of university-educated population as a core area of the electoral support for this party. In this poll, party gained support of almost 30% (28.29%) and compared with the first ever elections of this type in Slovakia it recorded an increase in support by more than four percentage points. Dzurinda's party recorded such an inter-electoral growth in voter support in any other region of Slovakia. SDKÚ recorded the second best election result in the east of the country—in the Košice region with the centre of Košice, the second largest city in Slovakia. However, electoral gain of the party was in this region by ten percentage points weaker than in the Bratislava region and growth rate of its electoral support was stagnating during the period here (0.71 percentage point).

Triple of the strongest regions in terms of electoral support demonstrated to SDKÚ-DS is concluded by Prešov region, where the party reached only slightly weaker electoral outcome compared to the previous ones. The northern part of Eastern Slovakia is interesting in relation to this party because of

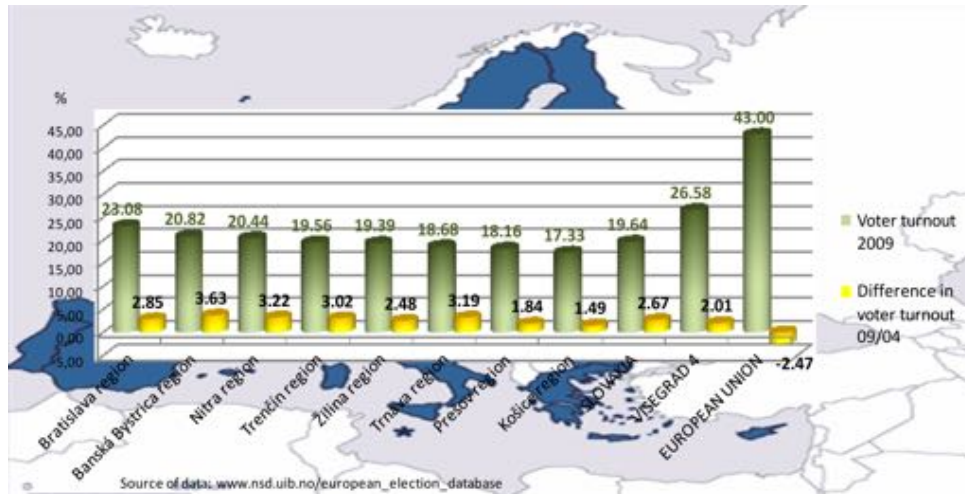


Figure 1: Voter turnout in 2009 European Parliament elections and percentage point change of voter turnout between elections 2004 and 2009 in regions of Slovakia (NUTS 3)

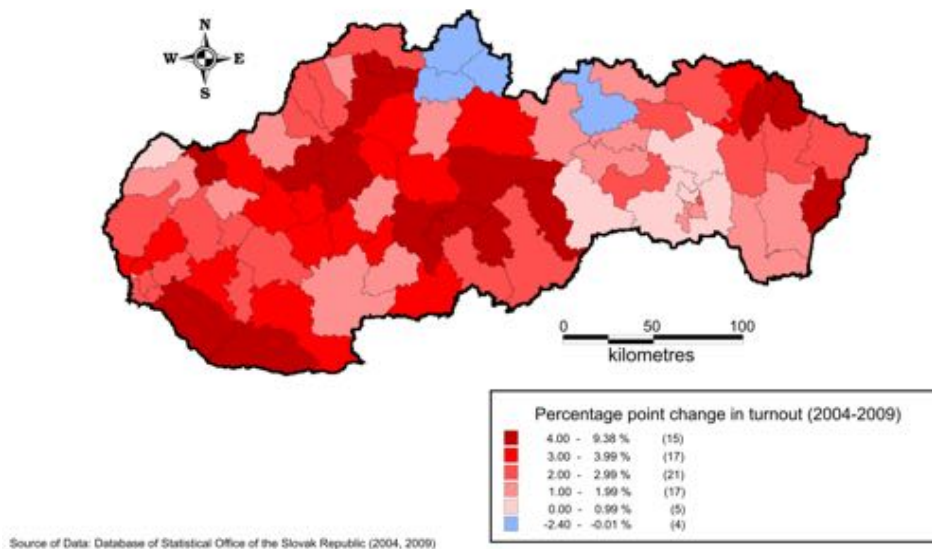


Figure 2: Percentage point change of turnout in elections to the European Parliament in districts of Slovakia between 2004 and 2009

following fact—despite relatively high regional outcomes of right-wing leader, there was also recorded the steepest fall in ballots of SDKÚ-DS between elections held in 2004 and 2009 in this territory in comparison with all other regions (−3.68% percentage points). The most dynamic decline in support for the former most powerful right-wing party was mainly due to the exponential electoral growth of socio-democratic Smer-SD to the north of Slovakia in the second half of the last decade. This area is characterized by particularly high concentration of Ruthenian and Ukrainian population, in terms of religion by high proportion of Greek Catholic and Orthodox believers. However, one of the main causes of such a sharp strengthening of electoral support for Smer-SD, whose members fall within the

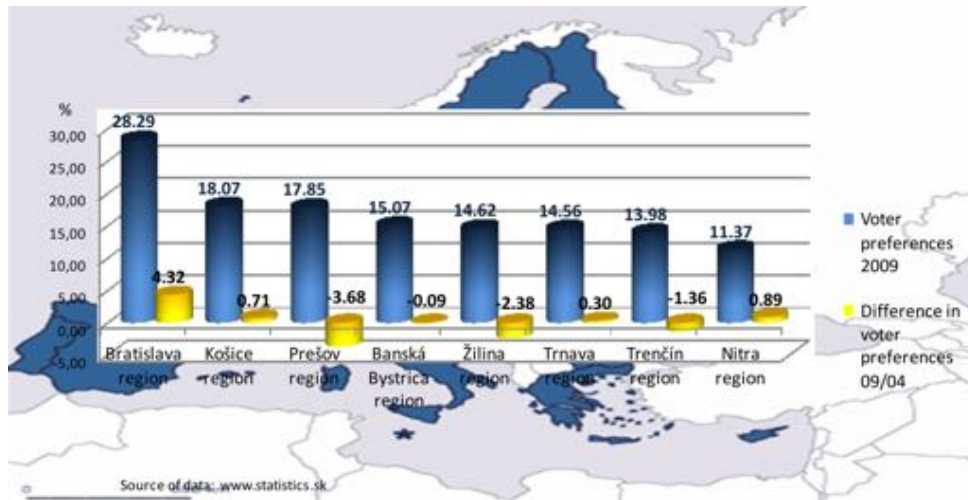


Figure 3: Results of SDKÚ-DS in 2009 European Parliament elections and percentage point change of SDKÚ-DS's electoral votes between elections 2004 and 2009 in regions of Slovakia (NUTS 3)

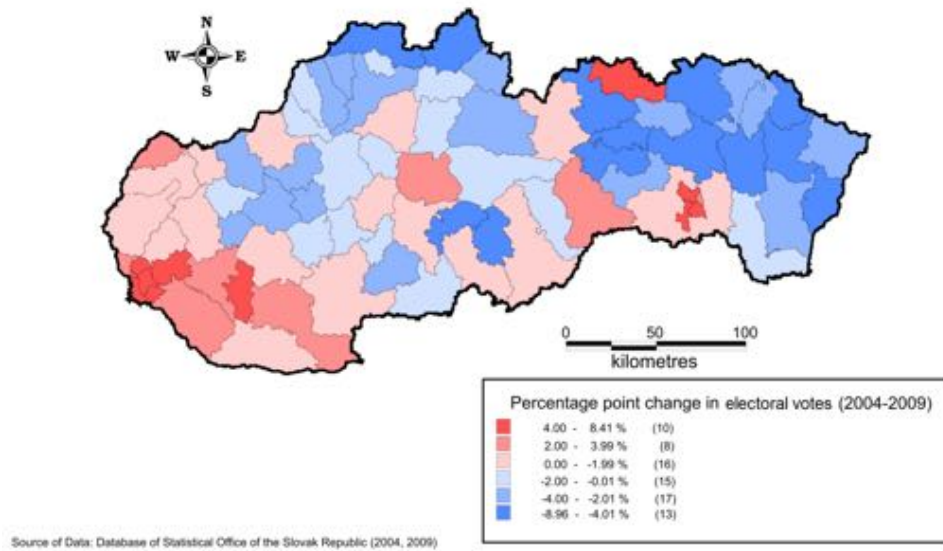


Figure 4: Percentage point change of SDKÚ-DS's electoral votes in elections to the European Parliament in districts of Slovakia between 2004 and 2009

European Parliament under the faction of Eurosocialists, is the “disappearance” of Mečiar’s ĽS-HZDS electorate in this part of Slovakia just in favour of election support to Robert Fico. However, the both certain and surprising remains that behind electoral fall of the SDKÚ-DS we can see strengthening the position of Fico’s party to expense of right-wing leader in this part of Slovakia, because the other parties from this side of political spectrum also lost their support in this region, by which would rather be the local drop in electoral support of Mikuláš Dzurinda’s political union explained. Party recorded more significant declines of inter-electoral gains in the northwest of Slovakia too—in Trenčín and Žilina region, where the less sharp decrease compared to the east of Slovakia was also caused by a rapid strengthening of the electoral gains for Smer-SD. However, the lowest regional outcome in elections to the European Parliament was register by party in the southwest of Slovakia in Nitra region (11.37%), where this situation could be explained by long-term dominance of the party representing the Hungarian ethnic minority living in Slovakia, SMK-MKP, which electorate mainly consists of Slovak citizens with Hungarian ethnicity characterised by the highest spatial concentration in the southern and south-western parts of Slovakia.

The biggest political rival of right-wing SDKÚ-DS, Smer-SD, managed to win the European election conducted in Slovakia in 2009. We have already spoken about almost doubling its remarkable poll results between 2004 and 2009. Spatial scheme of its regional electoral support is clearly legible, but also has some specific features (Figure 5). In Slovakia, Robert Fico’s party has maintained popularity above that 30% for several years already. At 2009 European elections, some regions showed towards this political party even greater sympathy. Highest voter support and the largest relative increase in electoral outcome connected to Smer-SD were identified in Trenčín region, where its election gain was able to double from 20 to 40% in relatively short 5-year period. No other political subject can boast such a rapid growth of regional electoral support in Slovak conditions. Behind this result we can see the process of party “domestication” in mentioned region to the expense of the ĽS-HZDS, which had a dominant position here for more than decade. Electoral score of more than 35% were recorded by Fico’s political party also in Banská Bystrica and Žilina region. Prešov region was the area with the second highest growth in electoral support of this political party across the whole Slovak Republic. The reasons behind this electoral trend in northeast Slovakia have already been discussed in the case of right-wing SDKÚ-DS. In every of eight regions of Slovakia, at least quarter of the participating voters expressed their support to Smer-SD in 2009 ballots, which can be regarded as a unique result. The most interesting to regional mosaic of electoral support of the current most popular party in Slovakia is just the fact that the party was able to rapidly strengthen its position also in the regions that had traditionally been regarded as so-called “liberal minded”.

In inter-electoral comparison, Smer-SD did not lose the votes even in the “rightist” Bratislava. Its electoral result of 2004 was improved by ten percentage points there (from 16 to 26%). Along with Bratislava, electorate voting for Smer-SD grew slowest in the neighbouring region of Trnava. In spite of that, increase of its electoral support was not less than ten percentage points in any region of the country (!). Apart from Bratislava, party of Robert Fico registered election result below 30% also in two regions located in the southwest of Slovakia (Nitra and Trnava region) characterised by high territorial proportion of the Hungarian ethnic group supporting especially SMK-MKP. These facts show that Smer-SD won in 5 regions of Slovakia, Hungarian minority party SMK-MKP had the strongest support in two areas (Nitra and Trnava region) and right-wing leader SDKÚ-DS dominated in votes in one territory (Bratislava region).

Party system in Slovak Republic is typical of fact that the winner of the general elections almost regularly does not compose the coalition government (ĽS-HZDS in 1998 and 2002, Smer-SD in 2010), emphasis is rather put on the post-election political agreement of several political movements usually located at the same part of the political spectrum. Regarding to fragmented party system existing in Slovak conditions, it stands that in ballots if one supports the party through his vote, whose perception of the world is closest to him, he must also count on the fact thus he indirectly support the parties and their program that have the highest potential to be a coalition partner to “his” party and to establish an operative (?) government with. Of course, meaning of European elections is not to constitute the government. Crucial is how many representatives are entitled to be sent by country to Strasbourg, and

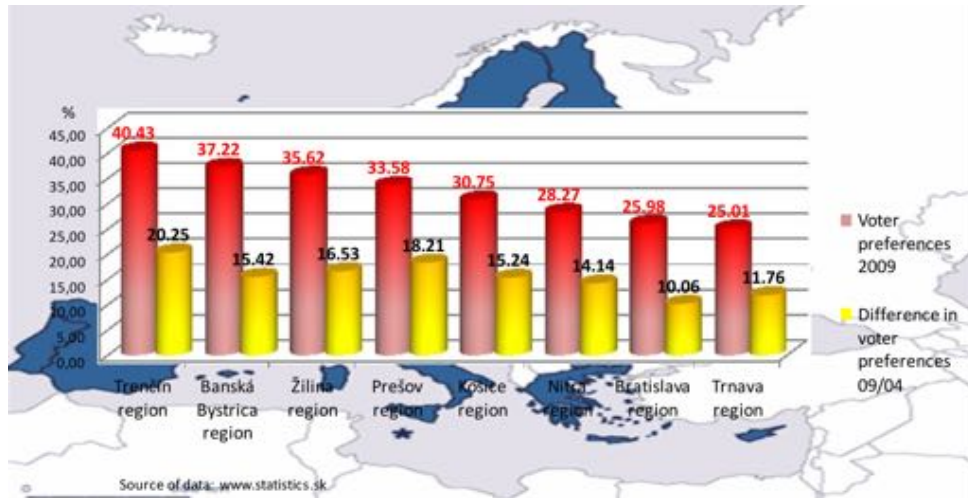


Figure 5: Results of Smer-SD in 2009 European Parliament elections and percentage point change of Smer-SD's electoral votes between elections 2004 and 2009 in regions of Slovakia (NUTS 3)

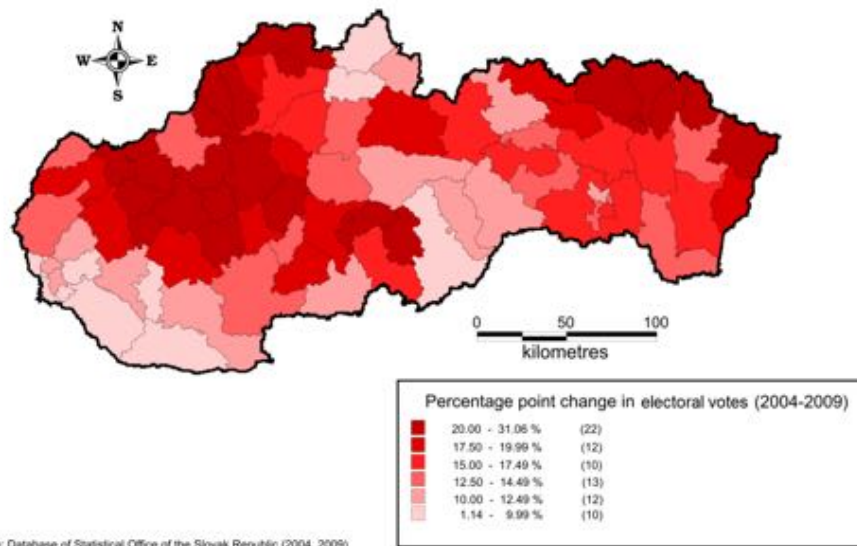


Figure 6: Percentage point change of Smer-SD's electoral votes in elections to the European Parliament in districts of Slovakia between 2004 and 2009

of course, what the political ideology of elected members is like. In this sense, the position of Smer-SD, which characterizes itself as a social-democratic (however, majority of Slovak political scientists does not agree with this marking for the party), is not so clearly dominant.

According to the results of European elections in 2004 and 2009, two groups—the Socialists and Christian Democrats (People's Party) have the strongest position in Slovakia in terms of ideological inclusion of political parties within the European Parliament. Smer-SD can be included to the first category and the second one consists of SDKÚ-DS, SMK-MKP and KDH. What is the regional support for mentioned faction of the European Parliament in Slovakia like? Let's introduce it in direction from west to east, since many socio-economic phenomena affecting political inclinations in Slovakia are characterised by a gradient of such orientation (Figure 6). In the broader region of capital city, successful Christian Democratic parties enjoy support of 40%, while the Socialists reach result slightly above one quarter of all votes cast there. Election gains for SDKÚ-DS pose the biggest part of the electoral success of the People's Party. Among all regions of Slovakia, the highest difference in support between the Socialists and Christian Democrats was recorded in Trnava region, where just the People's parties gained the absolute majority of the votes in the European elections in 2009, while voting support for Socialists was at level of 25%. In this case, high regional score of SMK-MKP mainly contributed to the win of Christian Democrats. In neighbouring Nitra region, the situation is similar. Christian Democrats reached its second highest electoral support there at all (just below 50%), but compared to the Trnava region, the difference between the ballot result of them and the Socialist's one is lower by approximately eight percentage points there (nevertheless the second highest regional difference in favour of the Christian Democrats in the whole of Slovakia at all). Again, the largest contribution to this dominance is created by electoral votes for SMK-MKP. On the northwest, situation is vastly different. Trenčín region registered the highest support for the Socialists among all regions of Slovakia, in particular at 40%. On the contrary, the Christian Democrats as whole have the weakest electoral result there in comparison with other parts of the country. In this area, the reason for this fall in votes for the right wing parties can be found in the regional above-average outcome of the previous coalition trefoil of 2006–2010 (Smer-SD, ĽS-HZDS, SNS). On the contrary, the smallest difference in electoral score of Socialists and Christian Democrats throughout the Slovak Republic (along with the Prešov region, where, however, the result was of the opposite orientation) was identified in the Žilina region located to the north of country. In the polls 2009 the Socialists reached only about 3.5 percentage points better election score than the People's parties there. Electoral gains of Christian Democrats were mainly made up of KDH's contribution, which reaches regularly its best ballot results there because of the regional population according to religion (the highest concentration of Catholics within Slovakia). In fact, in the region of Banská Bystrica, the struggle between Socialist and Christian Democrats ended in the same way as in the case of Žilina region. The Socialists gained by four percentage points better electoral score than trefoil consisting of SDKÚ-DS, SMK-MKP and KDH there. However, in addition to SDKÚ-DS's support, electoral outcomes of Christian Democrats were not already made of above-average regional score of KDH, but mostly of the Hungarian minority's party—SMK-MKP. In terms of political ideology of the most successful Slovak parties in European elections in 2009, the Eastern Slovakia was perfect for Christian Democrats. Due to significant growing in popularity of Smer-SD in recent years, the difference between poll results of the Socialists and People's parties was only 3.5% in favour of right-wing parties in the Prešov region situated in the northwest of state, however, in the Košice region, win of Christian Democrats was unambiguous. There, SDKÚ-DS, KDH and SMK-MKP together obtained by 12 percentage points better election result than Smer-SD did and thus Košice region guaranteed the third highest support for Christian Democrats in the inter-regional comparison.

People's parties (Christian Democrats) won in 5 of 8 regions in total, but trends in regional electoral support expressed in various parts of Slovakia in the period 2004–2009 are more crucial. The Socialists significantly strengthened their electoral outcome in all regions of Slovakia (increase by 10–20 percentage points), while on the contrary, the Christian Democrats recorded electoral decline in all regions (fall of from 4.5 to 11 percentage points). Socialists improved the most their ballot score in Trenčín region, the least in Bratislava. Christian Democrats suffered the lowest electoral decline in the Trnava region, the highest in Prešov region in Eastern Slovakia. Therefore, it will be really interesting to watch how in

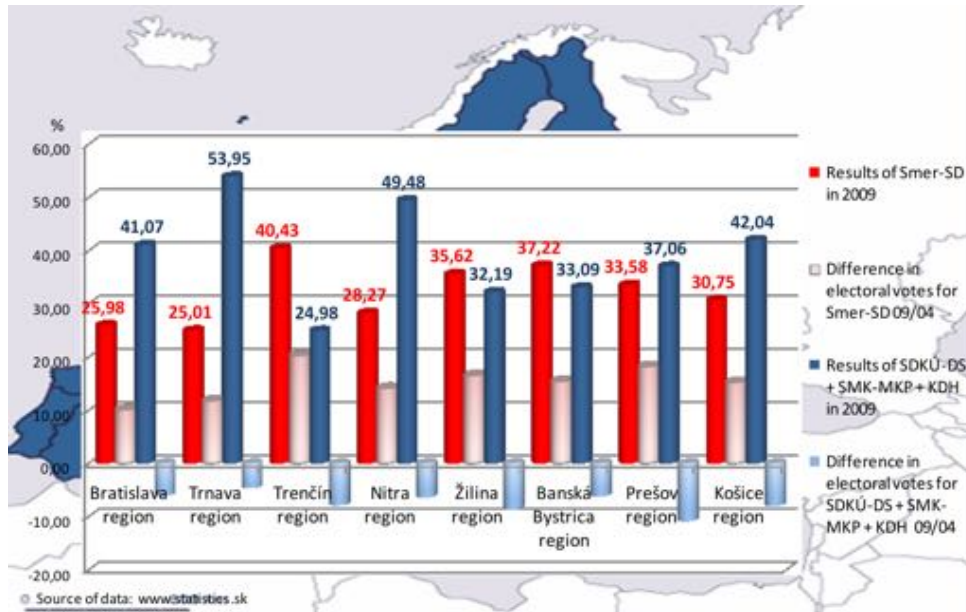


Figure 7: Results of Socialists (Smer-SD) and Christian Democrats (SDKÚ-DS + SMK-MKP + KDH) in 2009 European Parliament elections and percentage point change of their electoral votes between elections 2004 and 2009 in regions of Slovakia (NUTS 3)

terms of public support for the major political ideologies the actual distribution of political forces will respond to trends that are now quite clear. One can discuss whether or not the socialists still have the potential to raise their support in particular regions, where space exists for that and where does not. In turn, right must answer the question whether it can offer better and also workable alternative to leftist politics in the period of economic crisis and stagnation of population's living standards, which would manage to stop the declining trend of its regional electoral support at the same time.

Discussion and Conclusion

Within the representative bodies of transnational state groupings, the European Parliament has occupied a unique position. It is explicitly structured on the basis of political and ideological values of individual members rather than national. Members of the European Parliament are organized in political groups and not primarily on the basis of national identity.

Therefore, it is interesting to study the election results of ballots to the legislative body of the European Union, since individual countries and regions are significantly different in support of various political factions represented in the European Parliament. What are the crucial reasons for differences in national or regional support of the Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals or Greens? Why is certain political ideology in some parts of the European Union or individual member states prevailing, whereas in the other territory losing? Is it possible to bring back the practical outcomes of a certain style of politics to those areas that preferred it in election time? Is the concept of European elections considered as the second-order ballots with rather national than European meaning (van der Eijk, Franklin and Oppenhuis 1996; Marsh 1998; Marsh 2003; Marsh 2006) or it is something more than just a fight on the domestic political scene, a sort of European dimension of politics (Worre 1996; Nielson 2001; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004)? To answer all these questions the cooperation of several disciplines such as political science, sociology and geography is needed to be ensured.

Using the geographical and cartographic tools of interpretation, the present contribution has tried to identify the uniqueness of spatial pattern concerning the European politics displayed as the regional disparities in support for political factions of the European Parliament observed from the distinctive

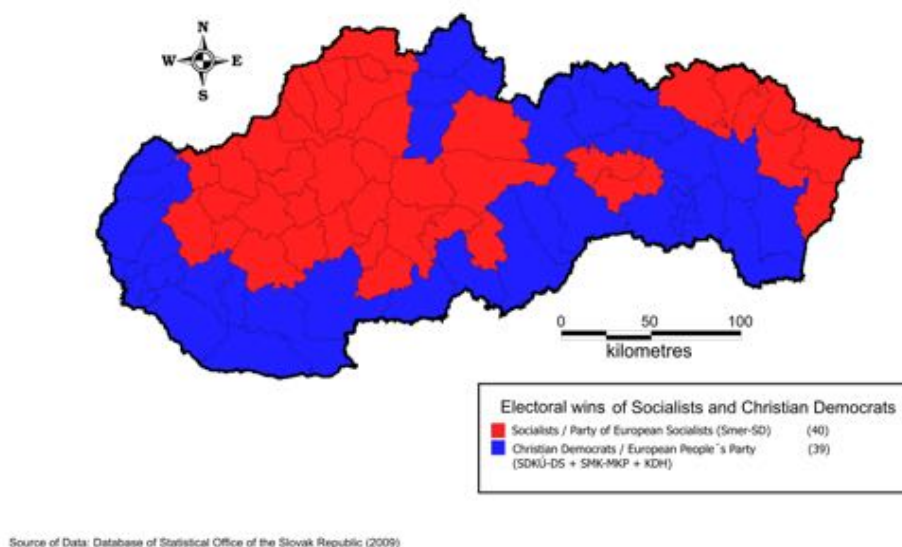


Figure 8: Electoral wins of Socialists and Christian Democrats in 2009 European Parliament elections in districts of Slovakia

perspective of Slovakian population. In the European Parliament elections 2004 and 2009, Slovak citizens had a first opportunity to express their views on both the functioning and future direction of European Union and to choose the country's first representatives in the European Parliament. Turnout in ballots 2009 held in Slovakia reached a level of less than 20%. Among the all EU's member states, this value was the lowest one. The pleasing news is that in comparison with the first ever European elections taking place in Slovakia in 2004 a public interest in polls of this type increased in all regions of Slovakia, however, in addition to the level itself the less positive is a growth rate of voter participation, which in either of them was too strong.

Looking at the spatial composition of turnout development in elections to the European parliament in Slovakia, it seems that voter participation had grown faster in southern and western part of Slovakia, while the increase in the east and north of country had been moderate. In some northern regions, the electoral participation even decreased inter-electorally. Differences in the levels of regional electoral participation are still relatively small and districts with the highest growth rates can be identified in the west, middle and in the east of Slovakia as well.

Five years after, a right-wing SDKÚ-DS as the national winner of the European elections 2004 increased its electoral gain mainly in the south-west of Slovakia and urban districts of the two largest cities, Bratislava and Košice. These have been the traditional areas of a core electoral support for Mikuláš Dzurinda's party, but despite this fact the most powerful coalition party (2010–2012) had been able to convince the other voters and strengthen its position in these regions. On the contrary, support of a right-wing leader in the EU's elections had dropped especially in the northern and north-eastern parts of Slovakia.

Territorial scheme of election results development expressed by the percentage point change of votes in the case of his main political rival, the Smer-SD, is unique indeed. Robert Fico's party managed to improve its electoral gain in each of the 8 regions of Slovakia in comparison with the results of the first ever European elections held in Slovak Republic, within which the Smer-SD also counted among the most successful parties. However, this unique ballot result had their regional specificities. The most dynamic growth of the party's electoral gains had been recorded mainly in the north-east Slovakia

(especially in the historical region of horný (upper) Šariš and horný Zemplín) and northern parts of western Slovakia (in Považie region and Horná Nitra region). Robert Fico's party succeeded to increase its electoral score by more than ten percentage points in all regions, while its main political rival, SDKÚ-DS, recorded no region with such growth (!).

However, if we have a look at the Slovak outcomes of European Parliament elections in 2009 from the perspective of membership of the most successful parties in these polls to particular political factions of the European Parliament, the regional status comparison of Smer-SD and right wing would not be seemed as clear as it might from the present analysis. According to such perception of ideological and political struggle, the Smer-SD dominates mainly in north-west, central and north-east Slovakia and, in turn, the right wing "trefoil" SDKÚ-DS, KDH and SMK-MKP grouped within the European parliament in a faction of Christian Democrats (European People's Party) prevails in southwest, south of the country along the border with Hungary and to the north in regions of Orava, dolný (lower) Liptov, Podtatranský (under Tatras) region, region of Zamagurie and južný (southern) Šariš. All regional findings about inter-electoral development of population participation in ballots by the diversity of its spatial mosaic confirm that the geographical composition of the turnout and its future direction as well is more difficult to predict and explain than it is in the case of the spatial structure of election results—this one creates a more compact regions, which allows more reliable determination of the factors that shape a geographical pattern of the party's support. Trends in turnout between European Parliament elections 2004 and 2009 had formed a unique spatial scheme within the territory of Slovakia, structure of which is often not easy to justify. Building on the above-mentioned territorial peculiarities, importance of European politics, in a broader meaning of country's establishment in the space of a united Europe and its involvement in the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical issues is appreciated by electorate of the capital region to the greater extent compared to other parts of the state. At the same time, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that the civic attitude of Bratislava region and its citizens had been able to face nationwide electoral apathy with difficulties since voter participation at one fifth (2004), respectively fourth (2009) of eligible voters appears also in this case as an underestimation of the importance of an active approach to European affairs. A slight increase in voter turnout between 2004 and 2009 across all regions of Slovakia was devalued by its sharp decline in 2014 (from less than 20 to 13%), which is mainly related to the nature of the campaign (role of political parties and media in pre-election discourse, degree of their agitational activities) as well as perception of EU politics as still remote from ordinary citizens and their daily life.

Final electoral decisions of individuals forming general but spatially differentiated election results are influenced by wide range of social, economic, political and psychological factors embedded in a unique space-time context. Geographic information on turnout may just help to reveal of regional factors contributing to the low level of public interest in active electoral participation and thus be one of the bases in search for an appropriate strategy concentrated on increasing the participation of Slovak citizens in searching for answers to the pan-European issues.

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