

Accountability Day for Governments in Slovakia

Defending the Mandate at a Disaggregated Spatial Scale*

MARTIN PLEŠIVČÁK**

Abstract

The aim of the article is to review the issue of performance voting in Slovakia on the national level but especially on the level of individual regions and districts. For this purpose, an ex-post index of government support is used. This indicator expresses the measure of growth or decline in a government's (governing parties') electoral support in parliamentary elections at the end of its functional period in comparison with its start, while also taking into consideration election turnout in the given elections. Governments in the period 2002–2020 are analyzed. In none of the five cases did the government manage to achieve a more favourable result at the end of its mandate than at the beginning. Government support on all levels showed a dramatic decline over time, particularly after 2010. An interesting finding is that on the sub-state level, while considering election turnout, differences in the evaluation of governments' performance during their term were not, on average, particularly significant between districts. When evaluating the measure of government support, we can on the level of regions and districts talk about a moderately large to large decline in election support for the individual governments (with the exception of the 2006–2010 government). While in the first decade of the new millennium, economic reforms and the state of the economy played a key role in the reckoning for the government, after 2010 more specific political events defined by differences in values between governing parties, scandals or simply the need for change due to 'material fatigue' were behind the changes in government. In these cases, a great deal depended above all on the measure of party self-identification. The study showed that spatially disaggregated parts of the country (regions and districts) are similarly sensitive to these stimuli when compared to one another.

Keywords: performance voting, parliamentary elections, Slovakia, regions, districts

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1. Introduction

Election behaviour is a social-political phenomenon, the study of which follows from the tradition of three academic fields. The sociological direction is primarily linked with the 'Columbia School' and its ground-breaking work known as *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), which emphasizes the influence of social factors on the formation of citizens' political attitudes. The economic perspective on the issue leans heavily on the theory of rational choice, understood in terms of the concept of economic voting coming from the tradition of the 'Rochester School', the supporting pillar of which is the work of Anthony Downs (1957), *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, emphasizing the assumption of a rationally acting and thoroughly informed voter. It is here that we can identify the roots of the concept of retrospective voting. Another approach to studying the electoral behaviour of voters is offered by the 'Michigan School' and is focused on the psychological aspects of the electoral decision-making process at election time. In terms of the development of the theoretical and methodological basis of this direction, the monograph *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) highlighted the role of party identification as the determinant of the political behaviour of citizens. The concept of retrospective voting, which evaluates the performance of the government in the most systematic way, comes from knowledge of the economic-scientific and psychological-scientific schools of electoral behaviour.

Thomassen (2005) provided one of the most comprehensive approaches to assessing electoral behaviour. His approach, aside from the dependent variable – which is the electoral decision (a vote for a political party or candidate in an election) – works with several factors influencing electoral choice. The first of these is membership in a social group, which has a long-term effect regarding electoral decision-making. The individual, due to his or her socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity, age and so on, is thus a member of several social groups. The second group of long-term factors is the individual's personal values and ideological orientation, which significantly influence the degree of identification (connection) of the voter with a particular political party. This also plays an important role in the assessment of retrospective voting, since voters who are more value-ideologically connected to a particular party may be less critical of its performance, and vice versa. This concept of retrospective voting is one of a group of factors influencing electoral behaviour from a short-term point of view (together with political topics, party personalities, election campaigns and marketing, media and social networks, and so on). All the aforementioned factors function in the context of a given political-institutional situation (electoral legislation, the electoral system, electoral institutions etc.).

We will primarily be interested in, from a theoretical and methodological point of view, the above-mentioned concept of retrospective voting, since the aim of the paper is to evaluate this concept through changes in the level of electoral support for governments in Slovakia in the years 2002–2020 by comparing their support at the start of their mandate with that at the end of their mandate (taking into consideration the results of the elections after which the given government was formed and the results of the elections that then

ended its mandate). The issue will be evaluated preferentially at the regional and district levels. This issue at the sub-state level in particular has not yet received sufficient attention in the professional community. Most studies focus on the spatial-temporal assessment of the phenomenon of retrospective voting only from a nationwide perspective (Anderson, 2007; Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000), without taking into account the geographic variability of the topic.

2. Theoretical basis

In this context, it is important to discuss the contexts and factors that influence the application of retrospective voting. The concept of retrospective voting (also known as performance voting, electoral accountability) represents a classical approach to appraising a government's performance (Anderson, 2000; Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Evans & Pickup, 2010; Fiorina, 1981; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Lewis-Beck, 1988). It is a component of theories of electoral behaviour based on knowledge of economics (often presented together with prospective, egocentric and sociotropical voting models). It is a short-term factor that plays an important role in the context of election behaviour, particularly in the run-up to elections. The concept of retrospective (performance) voting has traditionally focused first and foremost on evaluating government performance in the economic field (e.g. Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Ferejohn, 1986; Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Kramer, 1983; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; Singer & Carlin, 2013). It is based on the assumption that voters show their appreciation for good economic times by re-electing the government, but if the economy does not thrive, a large portion of voters tends to choose different political representation. Its explanatory effect has been confirmed in established democracies (Anderson, 2007; Bellucci, 1984; Dorussen & Taylor, 2002; Powell & Whitten, 1993) as well as in new democracies (Fidrmuc, 2000; Harper, 2000; Jackson et al., 2003; Pacek, 1994; Tucker, 2006). In this regard, the effect of the voters' standing in society in terms of socioeconomic status or existing income disparities within a society are also discussed. People who have found it difficult (harder) to make a living during the term of office of a certain government tend to vote for change. In contrast, those who have experienced good times are less critical of the government's performance. This does not always apply, however, in every spatial-temporal context. It also depends notably on the political-ideological orientation of a particular government (in terms of the left-right value continuum) and of the voters themselves.

When assessing the concept of retrospective voting, however, a much wider range of factors can be considered (e.g. Clark, 2009; Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Ecker et al., 2016; Lago & Montero, 2006; Powell, 2000; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels & Hellwig, 2004; Shabad & Slomczynski, 2011; Singer, 2011; Stokes, 1963, 1992). Aside from the economic dimension of assessing the government's economic performance, the concept of party identification also plays a very important explanatory role. According to the extensive literature on 'electoral reckoning', voters with weak or non-existent ties to political parties are more sensitive to short-term issues when voting – for example, to economic results or

corruption scandals (Davis et al., 2004; De Vries & Giger, 2014; Dimock & Jacobson, 1995; Fackler & Lin, 1995; Chang & Golden, 2004; Kayser & Wlezien, 2011; Welch & Hibbing, 1997). From this perspective, citizens who significantly identify with a particular governing party (as their voters) are less likely, due to a stronger ideological bond, to vote for another party, even though they may be dissatisfied with the way the sitting government has done its job (Gherghina, 2011). In contrast, those who are not 'bound' to any party will be more sensitive and inclined to choose another party as a result of these types of short-term factors (Tilley & Hobolt, 2011).

Another aspect is the ability of voters to identify, on the one hand, the competencies of the government and individual governing parties, and, on the other hand, the effort of governing parties to communicate responsibility or to transfer accountability to someone else (e.g. a previous government, the EU, the private or non-profit sector etc.). Healy and Malhotra (2013) draw attention to the issue of evaluating the government's performance from the position of the electorate itself, which may be more or less wrong when assessing a government account. The risk of error increases with the number of areas evaluated. Malhotra and Margalit (2014), in turn, discuss the responsibility of politicians in office with regard to their powers and expectations. They found that voters are more critical of politicians in domains where they practically or theoretically have direct responsibility. But in areas where politicians' competencies are limited, voters evaluate their performance much less critically in terms of meeting expectations. Lack of competency even leads to their performance being much more appreciated, even when expectations in these areas have not been met. We can observe the different effects on voters of governing parties (more influenced) or opposition parties (they will not support the government, even if conditions have improved). Thus, the evaluation also depends on the education of the voters themselves, their overall political awareness and their general interest in politics as such. Some authors state that retrospective voting is the domain of less politically oriented voters, because those who are more interested in politics will rather vote on the basis of their ideological proximity to a party that guarantees these values in the long run, regardless of its performance while in government (Kayser & Wlezien, 2011). Other authors, in turn, claim that it is the more politically educated voters who are capable of objectively assessing the results of a government and thus issue it with an appropriate certificate of approval, regardless of its political-ideological orientation (Duch, 2001). In general, however, voters have a tendency to give more weight to negative government outcomes than positive ones. Another important point is that each voter attaches a different relevance to the particular political areas on the basis of which government performance is assessed (Lago & Montero, 2006). The set of salient political topics differs from country to country (e.g. economic/social topics vs. the environment, domestic vs. foreign policy etc.), but also within them. This also varies from election to election within the same country. Research of De Vries and Giger (2014) has also confirmed the difference in the importance of topics in time and space. The assessed areas were the economy, social policy, foreign relations, public administration and services, immigration and asylum, national security as well as law and order, the environment and other quality of life issues. The state of the economy was one of the three most important policy areas for voters in 21 of the 25 countries examined, and for a quarter of respondents, it was the most important. For the remaining

75% of voters, however, the most important issue is a different topic, and it varies from country to country.

The influence of the media (their plurality, freedom, objectivity, choice of topics), government scandals, or corrupt behaviour are no less important factors influencing the measure of criticism of a government in relation to its re-election. The structure of government and the entire party system (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Powell, 2000; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels & Hellwig, 2004), or the quality of electoral legislation and the electoral system, are also important factors.

However, the electoral behaviour of the population in relation to government performance is not only shaped by relevant topics but is also demonstrably influenced by irrelevant events that evoke emotions in non-political areas. As the research by Healy, Malhotra and Hyunjung Mo (2010) showed, electoral support for a government (at various levels) may be impacted by sporting events – in this case, local or regional American football and basketball matches in the period before US Senate elections, gubernatorial elections, as well as presidential elections in the USA in the years 1964–2008. This influence may ultimately mean an election result that is a few percentage points better or worse for the governing parties. The research showed that the effect was greater for teams with a larger fan base (match attendance). Voters who are in a good mood on election day (e.g. due to the victory of their favourite sports team) will be more open to supporting a governing party, whose performance and actions in office will be evaluated in a more positive light under the influence of such emotions. Positive emotions can cause voters to feel more satisfied with their personal situation as well as social conditions. It is therefore probable that these voters are more likely to vote for one of the governing parties in an election. The opposite also applies – if their mood is influenced by the loss of their favourite sports team, the chances of supporting a governing party are not high. The research showed, however, that the impact of mood on political decision-making is subconscious. As soon as this reason is named by another person, the tendency to select a governing party under the influence of this event decreases. These results provide evidence that electoral decisions are influenced by irrelevant events that have nothing to do with assessing the competency or performance of a government. Similarly, a negative manipulative political campaign aimed at evoking fear, anger or frustration influences voters in relation to assessing the performance of the representatives in office (in regard to their re-election).

The issue of retrospective voting has not yet been explicitly addressed in the Slovak political-scientific, economic-scientific or sociological literature. However, we record certain indications of evaluation, but always only from the perspective of a partially related issue. These include topics such as electoral support for governments at the time of the elections from which they were formed (Krivý, 2006), the inter-electoral differences in support for individual political parties (Krivý, 2012), inter-party transfers of voters between elections (Bútorová & Gyárfášová, 2006; Bútorová et al., 2012; Krivý & Majo, 2018), rotation of government coalitions from a long-term perspective (Mesežnikov, 2012), development of trust in the government during the term in office (Bútorová et al., 2012; Bútorová, 2018), evaluation of government performance in specific domains of public life (Bútorová, 2018), and the development of support for political parties along the left-right axis

(Krivý, 2012) and depending on the socio-demographic profile of voters (Bútorová et al., 2012; Gyárfášová, 2018). Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the issue of political accountability in Slovakia, from a theoretical and practical point of view, was published by Baboš (2018). However, this did not specifically address the phenomenon of retrospective voting. In all cases, the issue of support for the government coalition as a whole, in terms of levels of support at the beginning and end of its rule, has also not been explicitly addressed. There is also no study that follows this problem on a regional basis (at the level of regions or districts). An international comparison of retrospective voting is provided by the latest study by Jastramskis et al. (2021). They focus on the Central and Eastern Europe region. However, evaluations of this issue at the sub-state level are still lacking. In the evaluation of this issue concerning spatial context of electoral support for political parties in Slovakia (in certain cases also including inter-election changes), several analyses have been published since the 1990s, e.g. Brunn and Vlčková (1994), Baráth (1995), Vlčková (1995), Krivý, Feglová and Balko (1996), Krivý (1999, 2007), Szölös (2000, 2006), Madleňák (2006, 2012), Plešivčák (2011, 2013, 2014, 2020), Mikuš (2014), Kostelecký and Krivý (2015), Plešivčák et al. (2016, 2018), Krivý and Majo (2018), and Lysek et al. (2020). However, none of these studies explicitly address the issue of retrospective voting in a regional perspective. As has already been mentioned, the problem with existing studies dealing with government election results is the absence of analyses of their success (from the viewpoint of the development of support) at the sub-state level. This is exactly what we have set as our goal and what we want to illustrate with the example of Slovakia. Are the differences between the analyzed territorial units in the case of evaluating a particular government significant or are they negligible? How are these differences manifested over time? What factors affect the differences between the territorial units? The following part of the article attempts to answer these and other questions.

3. Methodology

In the following part of the paper, the issue of government electoral support will be assessed at the national, regional and district levels based on the results of parliamentary elections held in Slovakia in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016 and 2020. At the regional level Slovakia has eight territorial units, and at the district level 79 districts. We note the electoral support for governing parties (the sum of their election results) in the elections that marked the formation of each government (i.e. at the beginning of its term) and in the elections that marked the end of the electoral term (at the end of its mandate). For this purpose, an ex-post index of government support was proposed, which, in addition to the above-mentioned aspects, also takes into account the level of voter turnout in each election. The value of the index for the years 2002–2020 as a whole was calculated as the average of values for the individual partial government periods (2002–2006, 2006–2010, 2010–2012, 2012–2016, and 2016–2020).

Governing coalitions in the period under review were made up of the following political parties (Table 1).

Table 1: Composition of governments after parliamentary elections in Slovakia in the period 2002–2020

Government 2002–2006
Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – demokratická strana [Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party] (SDKÚ-DS)
Strana maďarskej koalície - Magyar koalíció pártja [Party of the Hungarian Coalition] (SMK-MKP)
Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie [Christian Democratic Movement] (KDH)
Aliancia nového občana [Alliance of the New Citizen] (ANO)
Government 2006–2010
Smer – sociálna demokracia [Direction – Social Democracy] (Smer-SD)
Slovenská národná strana [Slovak National Party] (SNS)
Ľudová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko [People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia] (ĽS-HZDS)
Government 2010–2012
Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – demokratická strana (SDKÚ-DS)
Sloboda a solidarita [Freedom and Solidarity] (SaS)
Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH)
Most-Híd [Bridge] (Most-Híd)
Government 2012–2016
Smer – sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD)
Government 2016–2020*
Smer – sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD)
Slovenská národná strana (SNS)
Most-Híd (Most-Híd)
<i>*Note:</i> 1) without the party Siet [Network], which was part of the government coalition for only the first 5 months, 2) including the government of Peter Pellegrini, which was formed on 22 March 2018
<i>Source: https://volby.statistics.sk/, calculations and processing by the author.</i>

Voters can express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance of the government in the next parliamentary election by repeating their electoral support for one of the governing parties, voting for another party, or by not taking part.

For this reason, two fundamental variables enter into the construction of the *ex-post index of support for governing parties*:

- Electoral support for the governing parties in the parliamentary election (as the sum of the election results of the governing parties at the beginning (a) or at the end (b) of the election period/mandate)
- Turnout in the parliamentary election

Turnout was included in the formula because we assume that the higher total electoral support gained by the coalition parties, with the higher turnout, the greater the legitimacy

such a government has. If the governing parties receive the same level of support at the beginning and end of their mandate, but with different turnout levels, it is logical that the government has higher legitimacy in case of a higher turnout. Therefore, this assumption was included in the construction of the index itself.

Ex-post index of support for governing parties

$$ExSGP = \frac{S_b T_b}{S_a T_a}$$

ExSGP = ex-post support of governing parties

S_b = support for governing parties at the end of the government's term of office (in the next parliamentary elections)

T_b = turnout in the parliamentary elections at the end of the term of office of the government (in the next parliamentary elections)

S_a = support for governing parties at the beginning of the government's term of office (based on the results of the parliamentary elections after which the government was formed)

T_a = turnout in the parliamentary elections at the beginning of the term of office of the government (based on the results of the parliamentary elections after which the government was formed)

If $ExSGP \geq 1$, then there was an increase/stability in support for governing parties (in the context of the given voter turnout)

If $ExSGP < 1$, then there was a decrease in the support for the governing parties (in the context of the given voter turnout)

Measure of increase or decrease in support for the government:

- > 1.4 large increase
- (1.2; 1.4) moderately large (medium) increase
- <1.0; 1.2) moderate (slight) increase
- <0.8; 1.0) moderate (slight) decrease
- <0.6; 0.8) moderately large (medium) decrease
- < 0.6 large decrease

The index intervals were set with respect to the variance of the values of the index at the district level during the whole monitored period – in order to occur all theoretically possible cases (slight, medium, large) during the whole period at the district level, especially for values below 1, i.e. a decrease (which were the vast majority of cases, as all the governments during this period lost more or less preferentially at the end of each term compared to the beginning). Given these considerations, an interval of 0.2 was set as the ideal variant. If an interval of 0.1 were set, almost all cases would be defined as a 'large decrease'; if 0.3, on the other hand, almost no district would fall into this category.

4. Results

If we look at party support for the parties that eventually formed a governing coalition, in terms of the sum of their election results at the beginning of their term (in the elections that meant the formation of their government), the results were very similar in all five cases (see Table 2). Aside from the parties forming the government of 2006–2010 (Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS), which together received nearly 50 % of all valid votes, in other cases electoral support ranged from about 42.5 % to 44.5 %. However, at the end of their mandates there was a decline in electoral support for the governing parties in all cases. While at the beginning of the surveyed period, the first two governments declined only moderately in terms of support, governments since 2010 have seen huge drops in support. In the case of the most recent government, from 2016–2020 (Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd), their election result was only about half (a decline from 43.42 % to 23.50 %) compared to the election result that put them into power. Election turnout remained relatively stable between the individual elections, with the exception of a significant decline between the first two elections (a decrease from 70.06 % to 54.67 %). From the view of the ex-post index of government support, we can state that not one of the governments recorded a value higher than 1, which means that the levels of support, even when assessed in the context of voter turnout, declined in all cases. While in the case of the 2006–2010 government (Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS) the decline was only slight, the fall in support for the other governments was moderately large to large.

Table 2: Election results of governments, turnout and ex-post support index of governments in parliamentary elections in Slovakia in the period 2002–2020

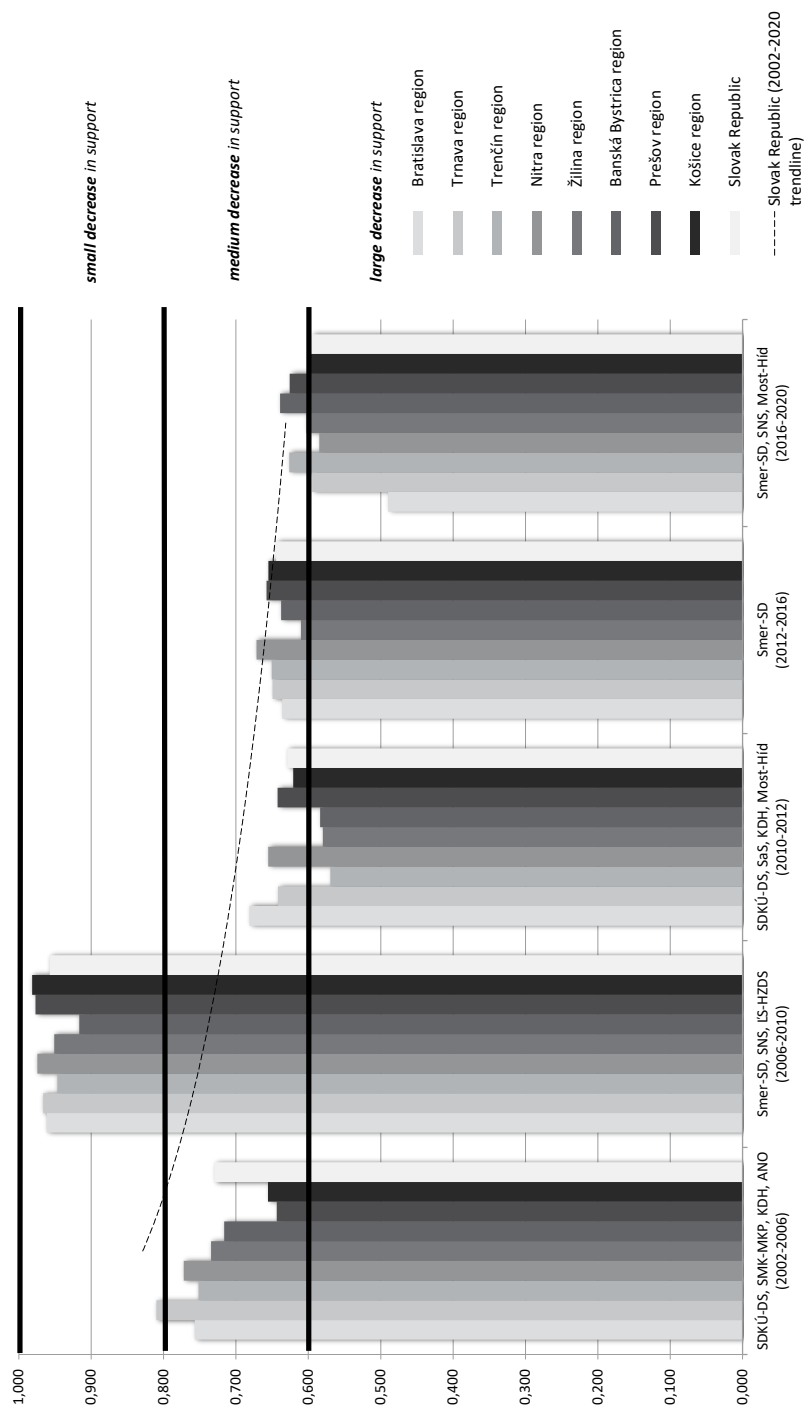
Government	Election result prior to mandate (%)	Election result after mandate (%)	Result – after vs. prior (%)	Turnout prior to mandate (%)	Turnout after mandate (%)	Turnout – after vs. prior (%)	Ex-post support Index
2002–2006 (SDKÚ-DS, SMK-MKP, KDH, ANO)	42.52	39.76	93.51	70.06	54.67	78.03	0.730
2006–2010 (Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS)	49.66	44.18	88.96	54.67	58.83	107.61	0.957
2010–2012 (SDKÚ-DS, SaS, KDH, Most-Híd)	44.20	27.68	62.62	58.83	59.11	100.48	0.629
2012–2016 (Smer-SD)	44.41	28.28	63.68	59.11	59.82	101.20	0.644
2016–2020 (Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd)*	43.42	23.50	54.12	59.82	65.81	110.01	0.595

* The Siet' Party is excluded from the table because it was part of the governing coalition for only the first five months, including the government of Peter Pellegrini, which was formed on 22 March 2018

Source: <https://volby.statistics.sk/>, calculations and processing by the author.

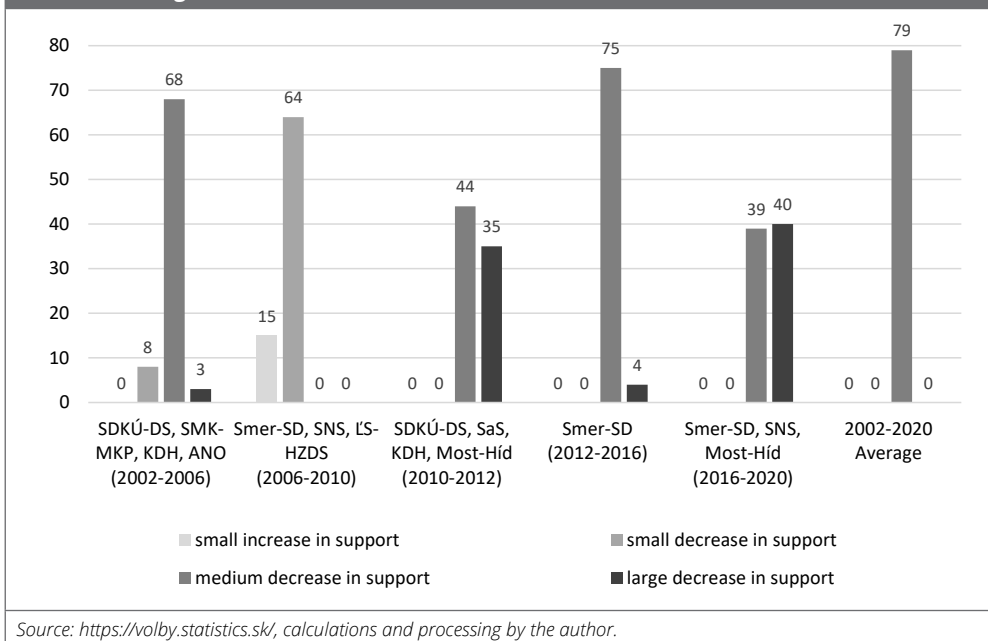
At the level of the regions (Figure 1) and districts (Figure 2) we can present several interesting findings. The 2002–2006 government (SDKÚ-DS, SMK-MKP, KDH, ANO) recorded a relatively continuous fall in support at the regional level from west to east, at the level of a moderately large decline (with the exception of the Trnava region, which showed only a slight decline in support). In the case of the following government of 2006–2010 (Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS), we see a relatively balanced dynamic of change among the regions, even if only on the level of a slight decrease in government support. However, the next three governments (2010–2012 – SDKÚ-DS, SaS, KDH, Most-Híd; 2012–2016 – Smer-SD; and 2016–2020 – Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd) all registered a moderately large to large drop in support. The 2016–2020 government lost the electorate particularly in the Bratislava region, especially Most-Híd voters. On the level of regions and districts, as well as nationally, the level of voter satisfaction among supporters of the governing parties, as expressed by the ex-post index of government support, was highest in 2010 (only a slight decrease in government support). This can perhaps be explained by the fact that at a time of economic and financial crisis beginning in 2008, the social democratic-nationalist populist government of 2006–2010 represented a guarantee of ‘social security’ for a large part of the electorate, and therefore the government’s results in the 2010 elections were not at all unfavourable (especially when compared with those of other governments in the last two decades). Nevertheless, a change in the values of the government occurred (the election result of right-wing parties in 2010 enabled the formation of a government with a different value-ideological anchoring). However, a change of government in terms of values and ideological orientation had already taken place in 2006, when the dissatisfaction of voters with the governing parties and society as a whole was much more pronounced than in 2010. This involved a more significant inter-election drop in support, with a relatively different degree of dynamics on the regional level. The second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda (2002–2006) passed several ‘unpopular’ measures in the economic and social fields in connection with Slovakia’s accession to the EU, which had more negative effects, particularly in the socioeconomically less developed areas of central and eastern Slovakia, and this resulted in the change in government in 2006 (from a pro-reform, right-wing government to the social-democratic-nationalist populist government of Robert Fico). The moderately large to large fall in support for the 2010–2012 and 2016–2020 governments also led to a change in the political landscape in terms of its value-ideological focus. The early end of Iveta Radičová’s government resulted from internal problems of the coalition, in the conflicting values of conservative-liberal issues (KDH vs. SaS), and especially in its position regarding the so-called *euroval*, or European bailout fund, which eventually led to the fall of this government. In the second case, the third government of Smer-SD paid a price for its ‘long rule’ (twelve years in the position of the strongest governing party, from 2006–2020), but also due to several government scandals and the social atmosphere after the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak. Only in a single case, namely in 2016, did some of the original governing parties become a part of a new government (despite the moderately large decline in the support for the second, single-party government of Robert Fico). Smer-SD, however, based on the election result, had to invite three other parties (SNS, Most-Híd and Siet’) into its government.

Figure 1: Development of the ex-post support index of governments in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in the period 2002–2020 at the regional level



Source: <https://volby.statistics.sk/>, calculations and processing by the author.

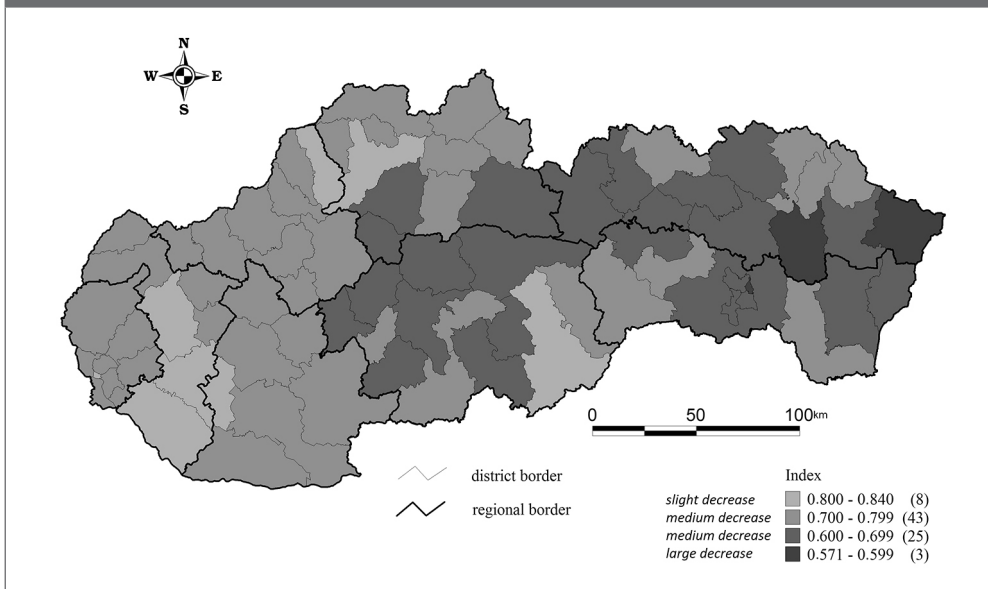
Figure 2: Development of the ex-post support index of governments in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in the period 2002–2020 in terms of the number of districts in individual categories



In the following part of the paper, we briefly present the results of the analysis of ex-post support at the district level for individual elections. In 2006 (Figure 3), the districts of the Prešov, Banská Bystrica and Košice regions, the economically less developed parts of Slovakia, expressed the greatest dissatisfaction (a moderately large to large drop in government support) with the second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda (SDKÚ-DS, SMK-MKP, KDH, ANO). Out of the country's 79 districts, as many as 68 showed a moderately large drop in government support, and in three of them even a significant drop in support. The lowest rate of decline in government support was identified in eight districts (three of which are in the Trnava Region). In contrast, the governing parties recorded their biggest drop in support in three districts in eastern Slovakia (Košice 3, Vranov nad Topľou, and Snina). This ultimately marked the end of Mikuláš Dzurinda's rule and the start of Robert Fico's first government in 2006.

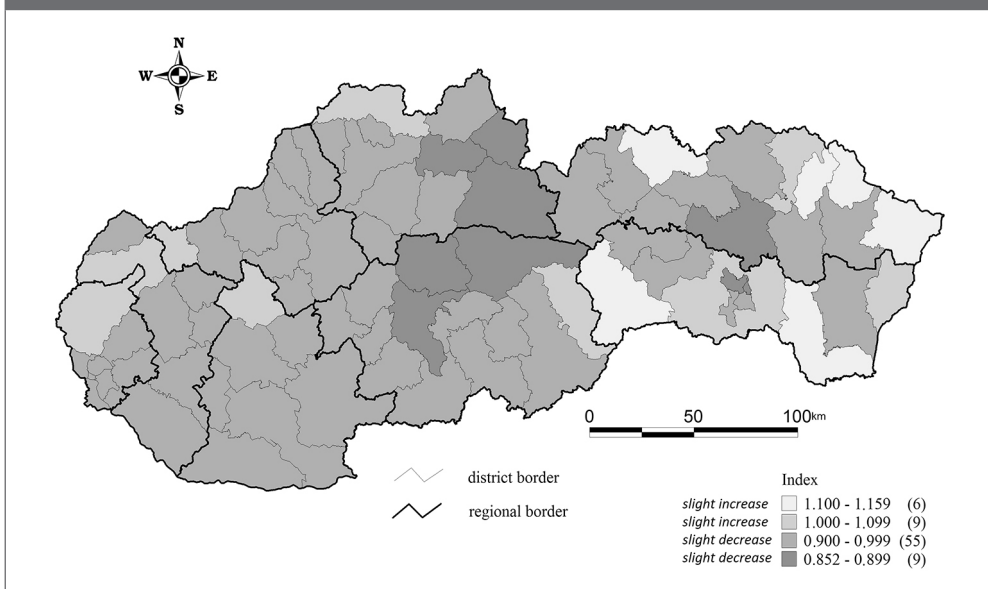
Four years later (Figure 4), the rate of decline in government support was found to be much lower than in the previous period, or in all subsequent elections. Fifteen districts, concentrated mainly in eastern Slovakia, even supported the first government of Robert Fico (Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS) to a larger extent at the end than at the beginning of its mandate. In the other 64 districts only a slight decrease was recorded in support for the social democratic-nationalist populist government. Despite a relatively favourable election result, the parties of the former governing coalition were unable to defend their mandate, and based on the election results in 2010, a right-wing government formed after a four-year hiatus again, this time led by Prime Minister Iveta Radičová.

Figure 3: Ex-post support index of the 2002–2006 government (SDKÚ-DS, SMK-MKP, KDH, ANO) at the district level



Source: <https://volby.statistics.sk/>, calculations and processing by the author.

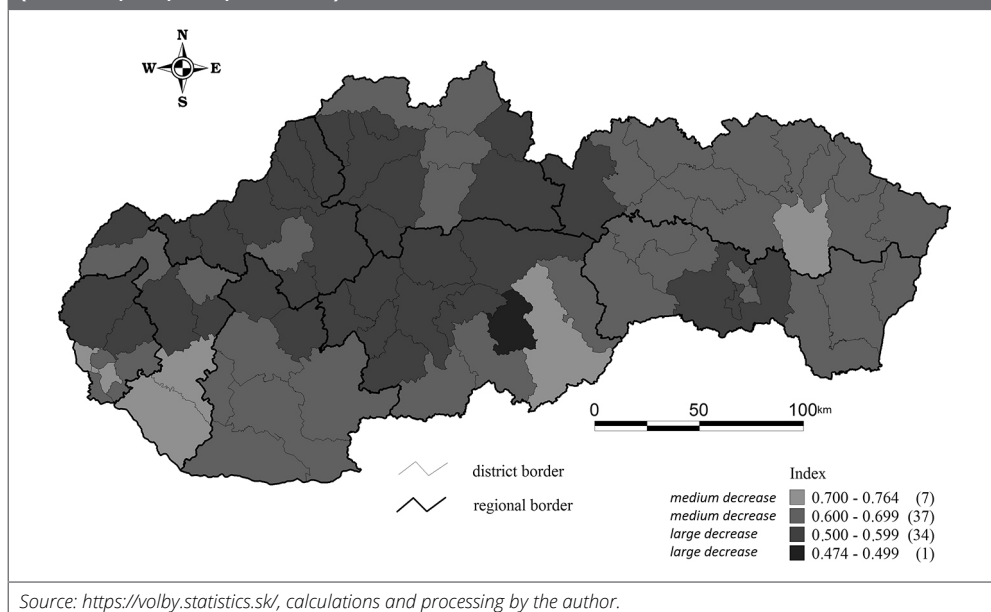
Figure 4: Ex-post support index for the 2006–2010 government (Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS) at the district level



Source: <https://volby.statistics.sk/>, calculations and processing by the author.

We have already mentioned the problems of the government of Iveta Radičová (2010–2012), which resulted in early elections in 2012. At the district level (Figure 5), voters for the governing parties expressed moderately large or large dissatisfaction with the government (a moderately large to large drop in government support), and in terms of the districts this was a relatively balanced situation (44 vs. 35). The largest measure of dissatisfaction was identified in the north-western half of Slovakia.

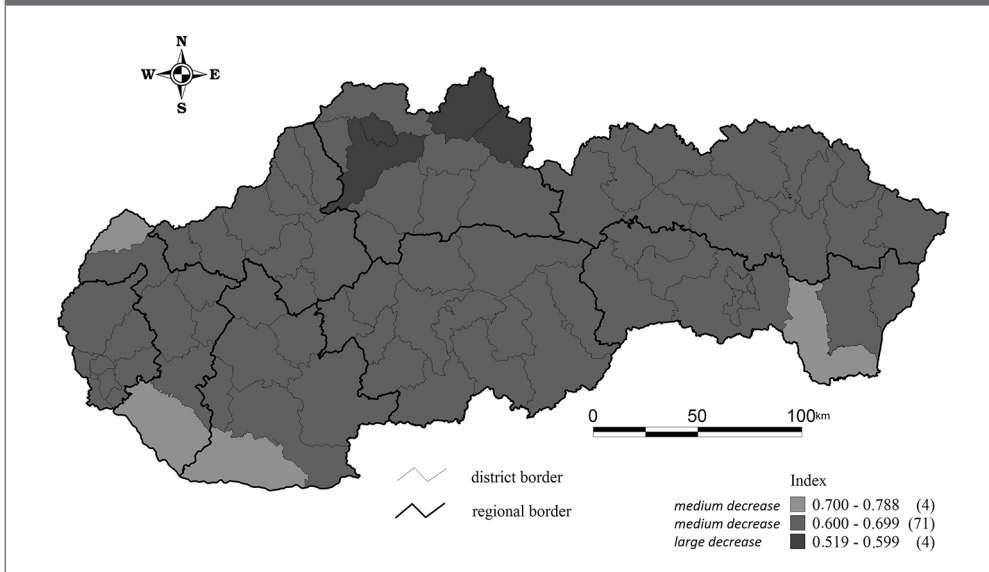
Figure 5: Ex-post support index for the 2010–2012 government (SDKÚ-DS, SaS, KDH, Most-Híd) at the district level



In 2012, based on the results of the parliamentary elections, the single-party government of Robert Fico (his second government) took office. Its term of office was also not evaluated as very successful (Figure 6), evidenced by a moderately large drop in support for the single governing party (Smer-SD) in almost every district (75). The largest relative decline in support for the government was seen particularly in the Žilina Region (Žilina and its environs, Horná Orava), which is typified by support for conservative and nationalist values, which, despite its social-democratic orientation, were long (and successfully) pursued by Smer-SD.

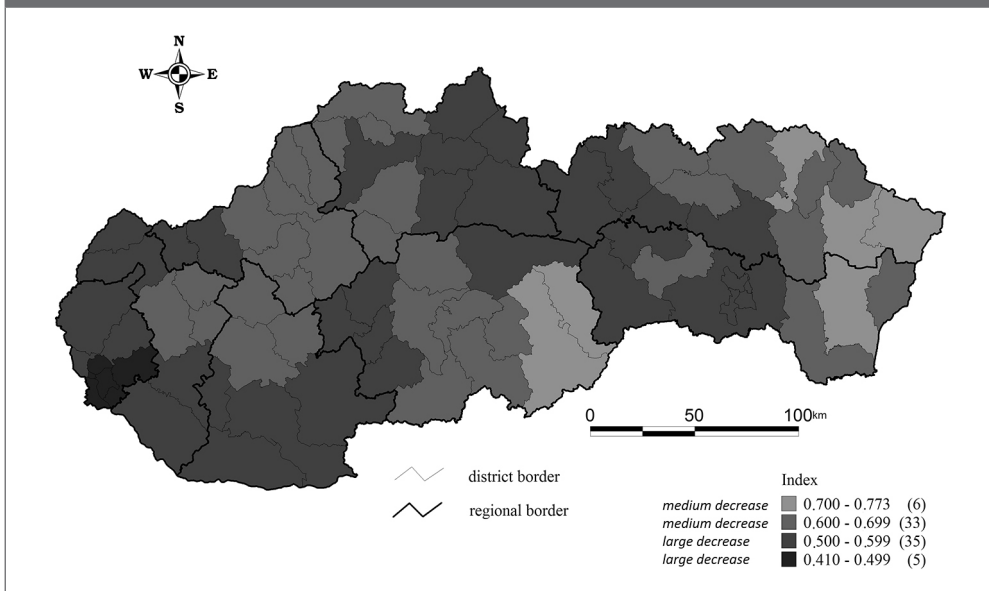
The last in the series of evaluated government sets was that of Smer-SD and other parties (SNS and Most-Híd, originally also with the Siet Party, which was not included in the analysis for reasons explained above), which was then reconstructed in 2018 after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak. The third government of Robert Fico was replaced in March 2018 by the government of his party colleague Peter Pellegrini. In the 2020 elections, at the district level (Figure 7), a moderately large drop in government support was recorded in half of the districts (39) and a large drop in support in the other half (40)

Figure 6: Ex-post support index for the 2012–2016 government (Smer-SD) at the district level



Source: <https://volby.statistics.sk/>, calculations and processing by the author.

Figure 7: Index of ex-post support for the 2016–2020 government (Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd) at the district level



Source: <https://volby.statistics.sk/>, calculations and processing by the author.

Figure 8: Index of ex-post support for the 2002–2020 governments at the district level of Slovakia (general view)

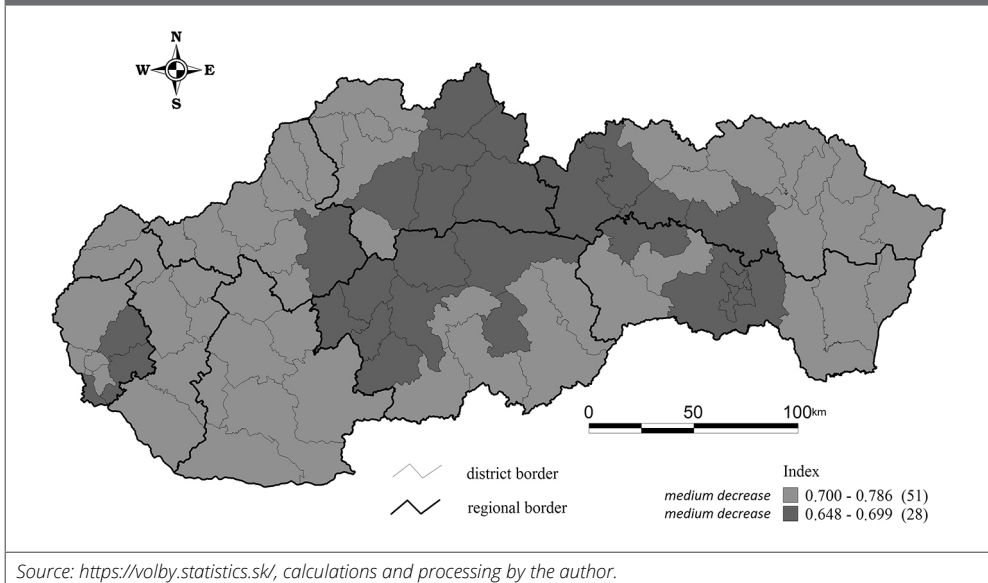
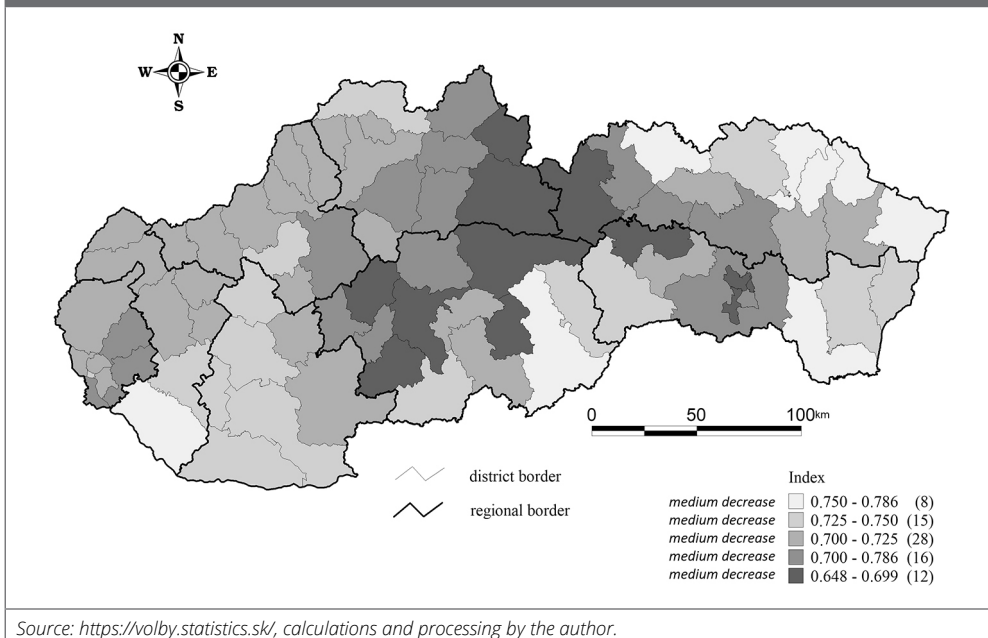


Figure 9: Index of ex-post support for the 2002–2020 governments at the district level of Slovakia (more detailed view)



(a similar ratio to that of Iveta Radičová's government of 2010–2012). Government support markedly deteriorated especially in the districts in south-western Slovakia (Bratislava in particular), in the north (Orava, Liptov, the Podtatranský region, Spiš) and in the western part of the Košice region (Gemerský, Spiš, Abov).

In the following section, we assess the period 2002–2020 as a whole. We can state that, on average, over a period of nearly two decades, districts have expressed a very similar level of ex-post support for governments. In all 79 districts, on average, a moderately large drop in support for the government is seen (the index is in the range of 0.600–0.800), which means a surprisingly very small degree of variation at the district level. Nevertheless, we can note a slightly more critical electorate against governments (Figure 8) in the districts of central Slovakia (Žilina and Banská Bystrica regions), creating a relatively compact area reaching into parts of the Prešov and Košice regions. In the south-west, the districts of Bratislava 5, Senec and Pezinok can be added to these districts.

If we look at this issue from a finer perspective (Figure 9), less stable support for governments was identified particularly in the compact belt passing through Orava (Tvrdošín district), Liptov (Liptovský Mikuláš district), the Podtatranský region (Poprad district) and Spiš (Spišská Nová Ves district), in several districts of the Banská Bystrica region (the Žiar nad Hronom, Zvolen, Krupina, Brezno and Poltár districts), and in most of the city districts of Košice (Košice districts 1–3). In contrast, voters were (on average) less critical of governments in the north-east (Medzilaborce, Svidník, Stará Ľubovňa, Snina and Stropkov districts), as well as in the Trebišov, Rimavská Sobota and Dunajská Streda districts.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Paying attention to the impact of retrospective voting on final election results can provide interesting insights into how critical citizens are about a government that is approaching the end of its mandate. It is also a mirror held up to the government, reflecting popular sentiments about its work and its results, in the context of fulfilling the election programme that the individual governing parties addressed to the electorate. Of course, the reaction to each government's performance is differentiated spatially. People in some regions are happier with its work, while in others they are less satisfied. This is what the final election results reflect in particular. These are shaped, however, by a wide range of social, economic and psychological factors that condition the electoral decision-making of the electorate to a greater or lesser extent (Campbell et al., 1960; Downs, 1957; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Thomassen, 2005), which makes distinguishing the true impact of performance voting on the election results of governing parties significantly more difficult. Furthermore, the influence of individual factors also varies geographically. In the case of Slovakia, we tried to cover trends at the national, regional and district levels by comparing a government's electoral support at the beginning and end of its mandate, while also taking into consideration the public's interest in the elections. From a time point of view, it was a relatively extensive research period covering the last two decades (2002–2020).

During this period, each of the governments fared badly in terms of voter preference at the end of the election period (compared to the beginning of the election period). While in the decade after 2000 this was less noticeable (both at approximately 90 % of the original election result), the three governments from 2010–2020 felt this loss very significantly (only half to two-thirds of the level of the original electoral support).

One interesting finding is that due to the research methodology used, in terms of categorizing the intensity of growth or decline in support of individual governments, on average for the period as a whole, all the districts of Slovakia fall into the category with a moderately large decline in government support (i.e. moderately high dissatisfaction among the voters for the governing parties). Some elections showed that the least stable support for the government was recorded in those regions that were traditionally opposed both politically and ideologically to the ruling parties. This means that the local and regional political climates typified by a certain political-ideological inclination seem to have had a stronger impact on the loss of support among voters for those governing parties that were not 'at home' in terms of the values in that region. For example, the popularity of the right-wing government of 2002–2006 dropped most noticeably in the Banská Bystrica, Prešov and Košice regions; the right-wing government of 2010–2012 saw losses especially in central Považie and Horná Nitra; the government of 2016–2020 fell especially in Bratislava. The trend towards less and less stability in the election of a single party (a weakening of party identification), which is associated with the emerging information revolution, as well as the revolution in the means and methods of political marketing (mass media, social networks etc.), also contributed to the dramatic fall in support for the governing parties, particularly after 2010.

In this context, however, aside from the influence of party identification (Davis et al., 2004; De Vries & Giger, 2014; Dimock & Jacobson, 1995; Gherghina, 2011; Kayser & Wlezien, 2011; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011), the importance of public attitudes towards the state of the economy needs to be mentioned (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; Singer & Carlin, 2013). This factor played an important role especially in the first decade of the new millennium, which was characterized by major economic changes (unlike the period after 2012/2013, when we can speak about good times with stable economic growth). Despite these facts, both governments that held power at the time (the right-wing government of 2002–2006 and the Social Democratic-nationalist and populist government of 2006–2010) were able to sustain relatively high support even after the end of their mandate. After the pro-reform second right-wing government of Mikuláš Dzurinda (2002–2006), which led Slovakia into the European Union, the first government of Robert Fico (2006–2010) had to deal with the effects of the economic and financial crisis that erupted in 2008. Voters in this case, however, identified the 'responsibility of the external actor', which resulted in a relatively favourable result for the outgoing government (2006–2010 Smer-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS). The minimal decline in its support was probably also helped by its Social Democratic-nationalist and populist orientation, which offered 'social security', which during a time of economic crisis naturally impressed many voters.

However, the influence of other factors should not be forgotten (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Ecker et al., 2016; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels & Hellwig, 2004; Shabad

& Slomczynski, 2011; Singer, 2011; Stokes, 1963), especially specific political events and relations within the coalition (the right-wing government of 2010–2012, the value-split of the KDH vs. SaS, the European bailout fund) and social scandals or ‘material fatigue’. (The government from 2016 to 2020 was a coalition of Smer-SD, SNS and Most-Híd, while Smer-SD has been in power for 12 years as the strongest governing party since 2006.) These were manifested to a much greater extent during the better economic times in the second half of the period under review (especially after 2012). It is specifically these factors, in comparison with the economically turbulent period of the preceding two governments (before 2010), that a great extent influenced the results of all three governments at the end of their mandates, which fell in terms of voter preference in a very significant way in an inter-electoral comparison.

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, retrospective voting by voters is also influenced by other circumstances. The degree of (dis)satisfaction (and as a result, the subsequent re-election of one of the governing parties) also depends on the appeals being made by other political parties at the time. The impact of the fragmentation of the party system (due to a wider range of options, i.e. an increasing number of political parties even on one side of the political spectrum competing for similar voters) also cannot be overlooked. Among the many impacts, we can mention, for example, the influence of the media, in terms of their plurality, freedom, objectivity or preference for certain topics. In the future a more exact, systematic analysis of the contribution of the individual factors standing behind the retrospective voting (e.g. socio-economic inequality, party identification or political topics, and scandals and corruption, as recently proposed by Jastramskis et al. [2021]) would be appropriate.

This paper has tried to evaluate the development of electoral support for governments at the sub-state level using an original methodology and categorization in terms of the dynamics of changes in electoral support for governments at the beginning and end of their mandates. This can be the initial inspiration for similar research in other countries, or in different time periods. A very interesting approach could be a comparison of regional units in several countries sharing similar historical developments, while keeping in mind, of course, the influence of a different set of factors and also depending on the national context of the elections. At the same time, however, it is necessary to be aware of the limitations related to electoral data, which do not capture the all the dynamics of changes in the electorate across governing parties, and the entire party system.

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