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Radical voters in rural areas of Slovakia and their role in the rise (and fall) of the ĽSNS party¹

The election of the far-right ĽSNS (People's Party – Our Slovakia) to the Slovak National Council in 2016 was a turning point in domestic politics, and presented a particularly pronounced phenomenon of radical voting behavior. This paper builds upon field research conducted in several villages where the party achieved above-average election results in the 2016 parliamentary elections. Contrary to prevailing assumptions of a homogeneous 'village fascism', the study unveils the multifaceted nature of these communities by employing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews and observations with quantitative questionnaires. A follow-up analysis of election results within these communities across successive parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2023 elucidates implications for ĽSNS's, and its splinter party Republika's, failure to re-enter the parliament in the snap elections of 2023. The study explores whether this decline can be attributed to shifts in voting patterns particularly towards the radicalized SMER-SD (Direction – Social Democracy) or SNS (Slovak National Party) that were able to form the new coalition. By shedding light on the dynamics between the social environment, political attitudes, and electoral outcomes in these villages, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of voting behavior in rural Slovakia.

Key words: right-wing extremism, ĽSNS, rural Slovakia, field research, parliamentary elections

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the prevalence of the electoral phenomenon surrounding the 'People's Party – Our Slovakia' (*Ludová strana – Naše Slovensko*, abbreviated as ĽSNS) in rural Slovakia. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party experienced significant success, secur-

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ing an eight percent representation in the National Council of the Slovak Republic and achieving a similar result again in the 2020 elections. It was only when part of the party split in 2021 to form the new party ‘Republic’ (*Republika*) that neither ĽSNS nor Republika could overcome the 5% threshold in the early parliamentary elections of 2023. Republika was only 0.25 percentage points short of this, while ĽSNS achieved less than 1% overall. It became clear, particularly concerning Republika’s narrow result, that its core electorate may have given priority to the party ‘Direction – Social Democracy’ (*SMER – sociálna demokracia*, abbreviated as SMER-SD) or the ‘Slovak National Party’ (*Slovenská národná strana*, abbreviated as SNS) at the last minute, allowing these to form the new government coalition (together with ‘Voice – Social Democracy’ [*Hlas – sociálna demokracia*, abbreviated as Hlas-SD]).

Possible interpretations of this particular electoral outcome of the 2023 elections might be accompanied by two different assumptions when assessing the decline of ĽSNS and Republika, depending on respective political preferences. On the one hand, supporters of the newly formed coalition may feel validated by the ‘skillful’ undermining of the classic themes of the extreme right, which lead to electoral success. On the other hand, supporters of the opposition might interpret this election result as a reason to overemphasize supposed differences in voting behavior between urban and rural areas, while simultaneously holding the latter ‘responsible’ for the newly formed government due to switching from voting for ĽSNS/Republika in 2016 or 2020 to voting for SMER-SD or SNS in 2023.

At first glance, the results of the 2023 early parliamentary elections appear comforting in the sense that they prevented the right-wing extremists from re-entering parliament. However, due to the inherent anti-establishment logic of an electorate drawn to more radical narratives, this ‘success’ is likely to be short-lived and last only as long as SMER-SD and SNS follow this logic. As they currently form the new government, it is only a matter of time before many such voters revert to a more extreme alternative. These parties can now position themselves outside parliament, assuming a victim stance that suits its nature particularly well.

Looking at the other assumption, especially voiced by some supporters of the defeated opposition, the main argument seems to blame SMER-SD’s renewed success on the ‘post-peasant’ characteristics of rural Slovakia and especially on “[...] *the village fascists, whose hatred is not derived from poverty; they are driven by hatred towards the people in the cities, whom they consider more successful, and towards the entire political class. They don’t vote out of desperation or ignorance, but because they can and want to.*” (Šimečka 2023, translated by the author). Just as in the context of ĽSNS’s electoral success in the past, these differences are starkly contrasted with the liberal attitudes purportedly prevalent in urban areas, evoking a deep and historically longstanding division of the Slovak society (Buzalka 2021a, Buzalka 2021b).

The following article will examine the extent to which the actual nature of rural life can withstand these two assumptions by delving into concrete examples from the rural area at the micro level. The main empirical basis for this examination is provided by field research conducted before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovak villages, where ĽSNS achieved first place among all parties in the parliamentary elections of 2016. The aim of this research was to elucidate the factors contributing to ĽSNS’s success in these villages and to examine to what extent this success can be attributed to manifest attitudinal patterns among the villagers.

In a second step, this paper will scrutinize the general electoral behavior in the examined villages, comparing the results for all political parties in the parliamentary elections of 2016, 2020, and 2023. The objective of this follow-up research is to discern whether any trends of swing-voting behavior can be observed, ultimately confirming whether ĽSNS/Republika's decline in these villages can be explained by electoral gains for SMER-SD or SNS in the early parliamentary elections of 2023.

It should be noted from the outset that, due to the timing of the main field research conducted before the current polycrisis (Tooze 2021), many of the tendencies described here may be reinforced or modified in the current context. However, further empirical studies are required to verify this, which go beyond the newest election results of 2023. Another important information is that the results of the field research presented here were conducted as part of the author's academic thesis and are publicly available in this form. The following three chapters of this paper provide a summarized overview of the field research carried out in 2019, which is available for detailed reading in German language (Varabyeu Kancelová 2022).

The comparative analysis of the election results presented in the fourth chapter of this paper is dedicated to the overall context of the early parliamentary elections of 2023 and aims to complement the results of the former field research. As is typical of qualitatively oriented approaches within the social sciences, the main intention of this paper is to conduct an in-depth analysis of concrete cases (villages), rather than to produce generalizable results representing 'all' rural spaces of a given country. Nevertheless, this paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of rural Slovakia and its electoral behavior, illustrating why neither the rise nor the fall of the far-right ĽSNS was solely determined by voters living here.

Background: The ĽSNS and its electoral success

This chapter aims to chronically summarize the electoral phenomenon surrounding the ĽSNS and to show which mobilization strategies were applied throughout the last years and how they shaped the electoral outcomes of the party.

First and foremost, the development of the ĽSNS as a political party sets it apart from other entities like the 'Alternative for Germany' (*Alternative für Deutschland*, abbreviated as AfD) or the French 'National Rally' (*Rassemblement National*, abbreviated as RN), often categorized as right-wing populist parties. Unlike these parties, the Slovak ĽSNS originated directly from a violent right-wing extremist subculture, with its membership comprising individuals from this subculture, similar to the German far-right party 'The Homeland' (*Die Heimat*, until 2023 known as *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, abbreviated as NPD) (Nociar 2017, Nociar – Thomeczek 2018).

In the early 2000s, the Slovakian neo-Nazis bifurcated into skinheads, engaging in unorganized violent activities, and a political movement primarily affiliated with the 'Slovakian Community Association' (*Slovenská pospolitost'*, abbreviated as SP) (Nociar 2012). In this context, Irena Bihariová (2012) spoke of the "transition from the era of neo-Nazism to the era of right-wing extremism" (Bihariová 2012: 28).

In 2003, Marian Kotleba, a computer science teacher from Banská Bystrica, joined the SP and transformed it into the political party ‘Slovakian Community – National Party’ (*Slovenská pospolitost’ – Národná strana*, abbreviated as SP-NS). After the dissolution of the SP-NS by the Slovak Supreme Court in 2006, the extremists gathered in the still-existing SP but remained outwardly apolitical while the association consolidated internally and put new political issues on the agenda, preparing for another try to gain a political foothold (Bihariová 2012, pp. 32-39; Kluknavská 2013).

In 2010, they circumvented the legal regulation that at least 10,000 signatures must be collected to found a party by buying up an existing party and renaming it to *Ludová strana – Naše Slovensko* (LSNS) (Gyárfašová – Mesežnikov 2017, p. 23; Drábik 2019, p. 551). The main strategy of the new party was to use a more subdued and ‘merely’ right-wing populist rhetoric while continuing to offer various neo-Nazi symbolic gestures for right-wing extremist identification for the circle of its ‘hardliners’ (Drábik 2019, pp. 556-560).

The first massive political success came quickly: In 2013, Marian Kotleba was elected governor of the Banská Bystrica region. The party further used another successful mix of strategies, particularly in the context of the migration crisis: on the one hand, it was increasingly active on social media, allowing conspiracy theories and threat narratives to spread rapidly (Drábik 2019, p. 554).

At the same time, the party focused its election campaign on personal presence in Slovakian regions, where direct contact with voters became the decisive mobilization criterion (Petková 2017; Walker 2019). This ultimately brought the LSNS its greatest electoral success in 2016, when it became the fifth strongest party nationally with 8.04%. Together with the Greek party ‘Popular Association – Golden Dawn’ (*Chrysi Avgi*), it is also one of the two genuinely far-right parties to make it into the European Parliament (Nociar – Thomeczek 2018). The party repeated its electoral success in the 2020 parliamentary elections, where it was once again confirmed as the fourth strongest parliamentary party with just around eight percent.

Paradoxically, the LSNS, under Marian Kotleba, was doomed by its long-standing successful strategy of its supposed ‘hidden’ use of symbolic gestures for right-wing extremist hardliners in its ranks (Drábik 2019, p. 556). After Kotleba had a cheque for 1488 euros written out for persons with disabilities, he was convicted of using neo-Nazi symbolism in court. His position of power in his party was increasingly questioned as a result, but also in reaction to his strongly conspiracy-oriented statements in the context of the coronavirus crisis.

This process ultimately resulted in the splintering of a part of the party, which founded Republika under MEP Milan Uhrík and other prominent former LSNS representatives (Paulovicova 2022, pp. 158f.). Despite great expectations (concerning at least the newly formed party), the 2023 parliamentary elections did not bring any success for either of them: Kotleba’s LSNS slipped below 1%, and Uhrík’s Republika narrowly failed to make it into parliament.

It is assumed that this shift was caused by the splinter party’s new strategy of cooperating closely with SMER-SD in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections and even positioning itself as a potential future coalition partner in a government led by Robert Fico. While SMER-SD underwent a rapid process of radicalization by adapting its rhetoric to far-right narratives in recent years, which peaked in the run-up to the 2023 parliamentary elections, Republika lost its appeal

to some voters. This might have resulted in them choosing to vote elsewhere at the last moment, leaving the party 0.25 percentage points short of entering parliament.

Field research in rural ĽSNS strongholds: Methodology

The field research presented here was conducted in the aftermath of the ‘big shock’ that ensued after the 2016 parliamentary elections, accompanied by numerous analyses of the ĽSNS phenomenon. These analyses often categorized the reasons into ‘socio-economic’ and ‘cultural’ explanations, each of which was either exaggerated or minimized based on the respective party-political affiliation. While academic discourse emphasizes the impracticality of searching for a single cause (Flecker et al., 2020), the highly polarized public debate in Slovakia often overlooks this nuance. Therefore, the broader socio-political objective of this work was to underscore the necessity of a solution strategy that integrates both approaches.

The investigation was conducted in localities across Slovakia where the ĽSNS garnered the highest voter share among all parties in the 2016 parliamentary elections. This share remained above average in subsequent (regional, presidential, and European) elections until 2019. The selected villages are situated in different regions of Slovakia, minimizing potential similarities in the results due to geographical proximity. A personal visit to these ‘strongholds’ of the ĽSNS increased the likelihood of encountering actual ĽSNS voters to identify the reasons behind their voting choices. In particular, the aim was to reconstruct the nature of their respective living environments, which contributed to the electoral success of the ĽSNS.

The methodology used in this field research comprises two consecutive approaches. The first approach draws inspiration from the study ‘Return to the Politically Abandoned’ (*Rückkehr zu den politisch Verlassenen*) by the Progressive Center Berlin (Hillje, 2018). This study conducted 500 doorstep interviews in right-wing populist strongholds in Germany and France, aiming to uncover people’s “*authentic patterns of interpretation of their lives and country*” (Hillje, 2018, p. 2). In this qualitative approach, respondents were asked to identify the most significant issues facing their country and immediate surroundings, shedding light on voting behavior tendencies stemming from their concrete living environment.

The first part of the field research of the environment in which the ĽSNS was successful aimed to address the then existing research gap concerning the fact that this environment has been scarcely explored using qualitative² research instruments. The qualitative component of the field research in three ĽSNS strongholds therefore focused on semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 individuals of varying ages and genders, recorded in full length. Additionally, supplementary observations of the village environment and brief, unrecorded doorstep interviews were conducted with over 50 other residents, which were then summarized by the author in the form of memos. The recruitment of interview participants was done through a ran-

² In turn, numerous quantitative studies have been carried out in the past decade, delivering important insights of the ĽSNS phenomenon (e.g. Mikuš et al. 2013; Gyarfášová – Slosiarik 2016; Bahna – Zagrapan 2017; Voda et al 2021; Garaj et al. 2021, Plešivčák 2023, etc.).

dom sampling method, involving either knocking on doors or approaching individuals who were already visible on their property or in public places within the village. Qualitative content analysis, following Mayring's (2010) framework, was performed on the transcribed material to inductively ascertain codes answering the following two questions: 1) what were the main factors contributing to LSNS's success in the village, as identified by the respondents, and 2) what were the prevailing topics within this village environment that were the same for all villages under study, and how do they further shape this lifeworld.

The second methodological approach within this field research attempted to close another research gap, which was described by Vasil'ková and Androvičová (2019) as follows: *"In order to understand the increase in support for Kotleba's LSNS, it would be necessary to research this electorate in a more targeted and detailed way while comparing it with the electorate of other parties. Based on the analyses and partial studies conducted so far, we can assume that supporters of the LSNS are more likely to incline towards ideas of right-wing radicalism and extremism (measured on a scale) than voters of other parties or non-voters."* (Vasil'ková – Androvičová 2019, p. 96, translation by the author). The quantitatively oriented approach conducted as part of the field research therefore builds upon investigations regularly carried out in Germany since 2002 (Decker et al., 2013; Zick et al., 2019). These surveys aim to gauge the prevalence of extreme right-wing attitudes in the German population, which are not confined to extremist fringe groups but are rather present across a broad spectrum of the social and economic center. A standardized socio-psychological questionnaire is utilized, segmented into six predefined dimensions that collectively measure the extent of right-wing extremist attitudes as defined by the Frankfurt School (Decker & Brähler, 2018, pp. 15f.).

For the quantitative part of the field research in the LSNS strongholds, the questionnaire statements from the German literature introduced above were adapted to the specific socio-cultural and historical context of Slovakia to uncover the right-wing extremist 'potential' within these localities. Additionally, socio-demographic information, including specific voting behavior and respondents' satisfaction with personal, local, and national contexts, was included in the questionnaire. Furthermore, other hypotheses were formulated and statistically tested based on the results of the preceding qualitative part of the field research. The quantitative part of the field research was conducted in two of the studied villages consecutively a few months after the qualitative one. The interview participants were again recruited through a random sampling method, with $n = 39$ in one village and $n = 127$ in the other. The response rate in this regard can be considered quite high: it contains 45.35 percent in village 1 and 19.81 percent in village 2, based on the potentially surveyable population of all registered individuals in the village who were eligible to vote at the time of the field research. Nevertheless, due to the overall low population sizes of the villages, the response rate cannot be considered sufficiently representative to apply statistically advanced methods. Consequently, the criterion of representativeness is largely disregarded in the research results presented in the following chapter.

Reasons for ĽSNS electoral success in rural areas 2016

This chapter provides a summary of the main findings from the previously described field research. Upon closer examination of the qualitative results, the predominant topics within the examined villages can be categorized according to the main structural and cultural aspects of the living environment. The structural aspects align with those discussed in the research literature as post-socialist restructuring processes of the rural lifeworld. Analyzing the regional distribution of the ĽSNS strongholds (Krivý & Majo, 2018, p. 95), it becomes evident that the party tends to achieve greater success in structurally weaker regions of Central and Eastern Slovakia (see also Voda et al., 2021; Plešivčák, 2023). This trend corresponds to the typical post-socialist phenomenon of ‘impoverished regions’ juxtaposed with ‘rich capitals’ (Ther, 2014, p. 143), which was also affirmed by this study’s findings. The structural characteristics outlined in the table below were consistent across all studied villages.

In addition to these structural aspects, cultural facets of the living environment differentiate it from urban settings. Of particular significance in this contrast is the perceived hierarchical subordination of rural life to city life, particularly in the context of compelled domestic and foreign migration to secure basic financial resources. Additionally, the overall perception of being ‘better off’ when residing and working in the city contrasts starkly with the romanticized portrayal of village life by some residents, who value its proximity to nature and purportedly familiar atmosphere.

Table 1. Structural vs. cultural aspects of the rural areas

Structural aspects of the rural environment	A large city nearby, but limited mobility and infrastructure
	Forced migration to larger cities and abroad
	Small village budget, dependance on additional fundings
	Scarcity of land
	Currently hardly any unemployment (but high at times during post-socialist deindustrialization)
Cultural aspects of the rural environment	Nostalgia for socialism
	Strong self-identity, latent ethnonationalism
	Religious character strongly anchored
	Cultural events moderately attended
	Traumas from World War II still passed on (‘burnt villages’)

Source: Author’s summary of own research results, more in detail cf. Varabyeu Kancelová 2022: 63-66

Why did the ĽSNS secure first place in these villages, whose characteristics could apply to many other rural areas in Slovakia and (to a large extent) in other countries? The personal presence of party cadres and their supporters seems to answer this question only partially. Increased mobilization by the ĽSNS was the decisive factor in only one of the villages, where several villagers came into contact with prominent party representatives. However, in all villages, the majority of respondents mentioned in the qualitative part of the research that it was primarily ‘the younger people’ who voted for the far-right ĽSNS. This assumption was ultimately confirmed by the quantitative results, which showed the highest correlations between voting for ĽSNS and the age of the respondents.

During the interviews, it became evident that these young adults hope that the party will provide ‘radical solutions’ for what they perceive as unjust. They view various structural grievances in their immediate living environment and the inability of local authorities to offer adequate solutions as unjust. Additionally, they mainly obtain information about national and international political events via alternative media on the internet, making them susceptible to disinformation. For these younger people, the ĽSNS functions as a kind of ‘substitute community’ through which they can identify, as there are limited cultural offerings in the villages that they enjoy. Some express this identification by displaying party stickers on their cars or wearing sweaters with party logos. In some cases, the village pub seems to foster a local ‘counter-culture’ characterized by aggression on the one hand and a sense of belonging on the other, allowing people to vent their negative emotions by discussing the political situation. However, the majority of villagers tend to avoid this place.

Most respondents surveyed did not vote for ĽSNS but expressed strong dissatisfaction with conditions in the country, often citing party politics, corruption, poor healthcare, or low income. Interestingly, although middle-aged and older respondents tended to be strongly patriotic or even nationalistic, they rejected ĽSNS as a party to vote for or held highly ambivalent perceptions of it. Additionally, many respondents were unaware of ĽSNS’s success in their village or were indifferent to this fact. Thus, unlike the historical fascism experiences passed down in all villages, the ideological background of the ĽSNS party is not fully known and is therefore not consciously associated with this negative experience.

Regarding local electoral behavior, all visited villages³ had a female and a rather young mayor who ran as a non-party candidate against a former mayor with whom the village was disappointed. All three female mayors were rated by a majority of respondents as hard-working, diligent, and committed to the well-being of the village. However, none of them are considered ‘original’ residents or even live in the village. Conversely, the former (male) mayors whom they had replaced were described as inefficient, lazy, and, in one case, corrupt. This local voting behavior led to a certain polarization in the village. With the collected data, it was not possible to conclusively determine whether and to what extent this circumstance contributed to the radicalization in national voting behavior.

³ The selection process of the villages consisted of several steps in which the gender of the mayors played no role. Therefore, this circumstance can be considered more of a coincidence than a pattern. Nonetheless, these examples of “local progressivism” show how mixed the attitudes in the rural area actually are.

However, the quantitative research confirmed that the formation of camps and increased conflicts in the village brought general dissatisfaction and a lack of social cohesion on the local level. It also became clear that the success of the ĽSNS is primarily linked to the presence of radicalized minorities (younger people up to the age of max. 40 years) in the respective communities, whose share of the vote became more significant due to the small size of the villages (< 1,000 inhabitants). These radicalized individuals are characterized by voting for the ĽSNS and as such tend to have more extreme and homogeneous right-wing attitudes, although political attitudes in the localities are highly mixed overall, as the quantitative results show. Nevertheless, a consistently influential factor within this lifeworld is the politically significant, general dissatisfaction of most inhabitants (independent from their voting behavior or political attitudes) with recent socio-political developments in Slovakia. As the field research demonstrated, describing the inhabitants of these rural areas as ‘village fascists’ is neither empirically accurate nor socio-politically expedient.

Early parliamentary elections 2023 – the fall of the ‘(village) fascists’?

Based on what we have seen so far, it was primarily a small minority in the ĽSNS ‘strongholds’ that helped the far-right party to its electoral success in 2016. The next step is to determine whether these voters stuck to their vote in the subsequent parliamentary elections or whether they migrated to SMER-SD or SNS (especially in the context of the early parliamentary elections in 2023), which have strongly adapted their narratives to far-right discourses, leading to the far-right parties ĽSNS and Republika being politically sidelined.

To conduct a proper voter flow analysis, larger datasets are typically required to statistically demonstrate between which parties the largest voter gains or losses occurred. In the case of such small populations as the rural municipalities studied, with populations of up to 1,000 inhabitants, it is not possible to ensure a statistically meaningful analysis using the usual quantitative calculation methods. However, by observing the election results of the 2016, 2020, and 2023 parliamentary elections (in absolute figures) in these municipalities, certain trends in potential voter flows between these election cycles can be discerned. The following chapter will therefore investigate developments in two of these villages.

The first village is the smallest of all the studied villages, with a total voters count of less than 100. Nevertheless, certain tendencies of possible swing voters can be determined from this example if only ‘larger’ differences in voter numbers between the individual election rounds are considered. A facilitating factor here is that both the total number of eligible voters remained almost the same and the majority of parties have a constant voter base with deviations of a maximum of 3% (2 people in absolute numbers). This includes the parties SNS, ‘Progressive Slovakia/Together’ (*Progresívne Slovensko/Spolu*, abbreviated as PS/Spolu), ‘Freedom and Solidarity’ (*Sloboda a solidarita*, abbreviated as SaS) and ‘Democrats’ (*Demokrati*), whose voters are strongly underrepresented in the village. In addition, the ‘Christian Democratic Movement’ (*Kresťanské demokratické hnutie*, abbreviated as KDH) party has a reasonably stable voter base and also the number of non-voters has hardly changed over the years.

The largest voter movements therefore took place between the SMER-SD/Hlas, ĽSNS/Republika and two other populist parties ‘We Are Family’ (*SME Rodina*), and ‘Ordinary People and Independent Personalities’ (*Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*, abbreviated as OĽaNO) parties, most of which only affected the 2020 elections and remained almost the same in 2023. There was also a larger voter base for the party ‘Network’ (*Sieť*) in 2016, which was split between other parties in the subsequent election rounds.

The main flows in the case of the selected village can be described as follows: Between the 2016 and 2020 elections, both ĽSNS and SMER-SD lost half of their (numerically strong) voter base in the village, while both *SME Rodina* and OĽaNO showed gains in similar absolute numbers. It is known from the qualitative surveys, which took place in the village just a few months before the 2020 parliamentary elections, that there is a tendency for families living in the village to align their voting decisions. Accordingly, it can be assumed that if several voters switched back and forth between individual parties, this switch was consistent with each other (i.e. the voter base did not tend to be ‘arbitrarily’ divided between several other parties). At the same time, it is known that the mood before the 2020 parliamentary elections was strongly against SMER-SD, with the number of voters who ‘migrated away’ exactly matching those who then voted for *SME Rodina* in 2020. OĽaNO, on the other hand, seems to have gained half of the previous ĽSNS voters as well as those who voted for *Sieť* in 2016. Interestingly, the number of OĽaNO voters remained the same in 2023 as in 2020. ĽSNS voters also predominantly stuck to their choice in 2023 (with a minimal deviation) but split between *Republika* and ĽSNS according to the intra-party split.

SMER-SD and Hlas made minimal gains in 2023, about half of which could be due to *SME Rodina* voters of 2020 ‘migrating back’. As can easily be seen from the analysis on this micro level, at least in the case of this specific village, SMER-SD was not able to convince former ĽSNS or *Republika* voters. Even if the numbers are very low, it is at least possible to see the trend as to which voter flows predominated and when; here, the difference between 2016 and 2020 is much more striking than that between 2020 and 2023 (where only *SME Rodina* suffered ‘major’ losses).

Table 2. Possible swing voters in village 1

	Difference 2016-2020	Difference 2020-2023
ĽSNS (+ <i>Republika</i> 2023)	- 10%	< 3%
SMER-SD (+ Hlas 2023)	- 12%	+ 4%
<i>SME Rodina</i>	+ 12%	- 10%
OĽaNO	+ 19%	< 3%
<i>Sieť</i>	- 11%	-
KDH	< 3 %	< 3 %

SNS	< 3 %	< 3 %
PS (+ Spolu 2020)	< 3 %	< 3 %
SaS	< 3 %	< 3 %
Demokrati	-	< 3 %
Different	< 3 %	< 3 %
No vote	< 3 %	< 3 %

Source: Author's own calculations

The second village analyzed here with regard to possible voter flows already has a higher population of almost 450 eligible voters. The individual voter movements can therefore be assigned less clearly, as the shifts are likely to be more variable here, and possible generational effects (deaths, new voters) will have a greater impact than in the smaller village with a manageable number of inhabitants. Similar to village 1, however, the number of eligible voters remains almost constant over the years and here, too, the majority of parties only show small differences of max. 3% (15 people in absolute numbers) between the election rounds.

When looking at the larger differences between the voters of the individual parties, certain trends emerge that are quite comparable with village 1. Here, too, it is primarily the SMER-SD/Hlas and OĽaNO parties that saw the largest voter movements in all three rounds of voting. It also marginally affected the party 'For the People' (*Za ľudí*), which was able to build up a larger voter base in the village for the 2020 elections (and subsequently lost it again). A larger number of swing voters from the ĽSNS/Republika, SME Rodina and SNS parties only occurred between 2016 and 2020, but not in the 2023 parliamentary elections. SMER-SD appears to have made the greater gains here, while KDH and PS also became stronger in the village at the same time. Unlike in village 1, the voter base of the OĽaNO party, which had built up before the 2020 elections, had completely moved away again by 2023.

Table 3. Possible swing voters in village 2

	Difference 2016-2020	Difference 2020-2023
ĽSNS (+ Republika 2023)	- 6 %	< 3 %
SMER-SD (+ Hlas 2023)	- 4 %	+ 11 %
SNS	- 10 %	< 3 %
SME Rodina	+ 4 %	< 3 %
OĽaNO	+ 14 %	- 14 %
KDH	< 3 %	+ 4 %

PS (+ Spolu 2020)	< 3 %	+ 7 %
Za ľudí	+ 5 %	- 5 %
Dobrá voľba	< 3 %	< 3 %
Vlast'	< 3 %	< 3 %
Sieť	< 3 %	-
SaS	< 3 %	< 3 %
Demokrati	-	< 3 %
Different	< 3 %	< 3 %
No vote	< 3 %	< 3 %

Source: Author's own calculations

Conclusion

As we have seen from the examples above, the actual voting behavior in the villages, which were considered ĽSNS strongholds in 2016, is quite complex. Although many of these voters did turn away from the ĽSNS (and the splinter party *Republika*), this shift occurred primarily in the lead-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections and seemed more closely linked to the populist mobilization by *OĽaNO* (cf. also Haughton et al. 2021). The assumption that the 2023 parliamentary elections would grant *SMER-SD* another victory thanks to rural communities' residents, where the ĽSNS once held sway, cannot be confirmed based on the analyzed material. Nonetheless, further studies, especially those using qualitative approaches, are needed to update the 2019 data from these municipalities in the new (crisis) context.

While research on this matter may seem valuable, it is essential not only to focus on potential differences between rural and urban communities but also to observe the local context in all its complexity. Categorizations of voters based on their place of residence can be useful analytical tools, but migration movements within and outside the country result in a continuous change in values, attitudes, and voting preferences. Therefore, neither urban nor rural areas can be viewed as homogeneous or self-contained spaces responsible for unpleasant election results. While certain tendencies in party preferences alongside conservative and liberal values may exist between rural and urban areas (cf. Harmaňoš – Plešivčák 2021), this phenomenon applies to all countries, not just Slovakia. Overemphasizing this difference and subjecting it to normative evaluation can lead to the emergence of othering tendencies (us vs. them), reinforcing potential polarization trends.

Regarding the ĽSNS, previous studies have demonstrated the party's ability to win over entire (prefabricated) housing estates in the two major cities of Bratislava and Košice (Bahna et al. 2018, pp. 160ff.). Additionally, an analysis of electoral success based on town size indicates that the ĽSNS was elected almost equally in both villages and towns (Krivý – Majo 2018, p. 103). Contrary to the clichéd assumption of the 'typical' rural ĽSNS voter, however, the 2016 elec-

tion results showed that it was younger people, who voted for the party (Gyárfášová – Slosiarik 2016). In a focus group conducted with ĽSNS voters, it was found that two main motives predominated (regardless of the respondents' age): Either the sincere belief that the ĽSNS can change something, or the classic protest vote to enforce a change with the help of the 'loudest' party (Vražda 2017, p. 153).

Equating such voters with the more conservative and generally older electorate of, for example, SMER-SD or SNS is therefore unlikely to be empirically accurate. As is also already known, the use of far-right rhetoric by established parties can potentially lead to electoral successes in the short term, but dangerous discourses (which include anti-establishment and anti-system attitudes) are normalized in society (Barleš – Hartleb 2010; Stojarová 2018). This cannot be a desirable long-term goal of the established parties, as this strategy could ultimately turn against them at any time.

Additionally, these processes harm the entire society, as they fuel a downward spiral of persistent (right-wing) populism that is difficult to break. Ben Stanley (2008) described this phenomenon as *«playing on popular emotions, making irresponsible and unrealistic promises to the masses, and stoking an atmosphere of enmity and distrust towards political elites.»* (Stanley 2008, p. 101). In the context of post-socialist countries, Ivan Krastev (2014) spoke of the fact that *“The common message coming from the authorities has been not so much ‘trust us’ [...] but rather ‘do not trust nobody’.”* (Krastev 2014, p. 8). Such political elites therefore primarily address issues that have a strongly personalized and individualized character, making little effort to find constructive solutions to real problems faced by a majority of citizens. This is noticeable at the level of national politics, but particularly also in local contexts that surround voters on a daily basis, as we saw in this investigation.

What should therefore be primarily observed are not so many differences in individualized voting behavior (and possible reasons for this), but rather structural grievances of both 'socio-economic' as well as 'cultural' character within the respective living environments, which on a systemic level ensure that (some of) the people turn to a radical solution. In this context, the differences between urban and rural areas are certainly present, although recent (meaning the last 30 years of) post-socialist transformation processes should also be clearly named as the main reason for these differences in order to find tangible solutions to the existing problem areas.

This approach might be more productive than promoting empty labels such as 'village fascists' and 'post-peasants', as is done in recent discussions surrounding rural/urban relations in the light of the latest electoral outcomes. As demonstrated in this paper, homogenizing rural Slovakia and equating it with being 'populist', 'extremist', or even 'fascist' lacks both empirical substantiation as well as theoretical value and may even further exacerbate societal polarization and political disintegration tendencies.

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