

# UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' REFLECTION ON CHOSEN CHARACTERISTICS OF NATIONAL POPULISM IN SLOVAKIA

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The main aim of the presented study is the exploration of university students' reflection on chosen characteristics of national populism in Slovakia.

**Methods.** For the main method of the study, a quantitative approach has been used. Students studying at universities in the Slovak Republic have been addressed via a questionnaire prepared in advance. Recorded answers of sixty-seven university students studying in the Slovak Republic have been analysed via first-degree data sorting.

**Results.** The study has a theoretical-empirical character. In the theoretical part, there is a brief characteristic of national populism and characteristics of national-populistic tactics and strategies in Slovakia. In the empirical part, the analysis of surveyed university students' opinions shows that most addressed university students studying at Slovak universities have not expressed a negative view of presenting the interests of the Slovak nation by political representatives.

**Conclusion.** The addressed university students reflect on the issue of national populism on the Slovak political scene. On the other hand, respondents lack a relevant and expert view of the issue of national populism through the optics of a university educator who would (via his/her expert opinion) help students to identify undesired national-populistic tactics and strategies. A more detailed study of university students' opinions related to their view of national populism and its manifestations in Slovakia should be supplemented by a qualitative study, using in-depth interviews.

**Key words:** nation, national populism, national-populistic tactics and strategies, politics, university students



## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary social development is characterised by many occurrences and processes that influence the overall character and structure of elemental social relations. Individuals and their view of current affairs not only in their immediate surroundings but also on a global scale play an important role in the development of society. In general, however, it is important to note that society-wide events, at the same time, affect individual and subjective opinions of people in most everyday social interactions. We consider the topic of preserving and maintaining national identity one of contemporary social issues. In this context, Tímea Šeben Začková, Anna Mravcová and Štefan Baranovič (2020) state that “the terms ‘global’ and ‘local’ often appear within the topic and they should not be viewed as opposite ends of the spatial spectrum but as dynamically and permanently intersecting and overlapping areas” (pp. 60-61). The existence of national awareness comes gradually to the fore for an increasing number of various groups of citizens belonging to a particular nation. National awareness among the members of a nation can be strengthened in several ways.

Political leaders play a consequential role in promoting and emphasising the importance of national affiliation (Bissenbayeva et al., 2020). Usually, however, while highlighting the importance of belonging to a nation, political leaders’ only objective is to promote themselves and gain popularity. We, therefore, call it national populism. National populism represents one of the areas of politics that must become, based on the above-said, a subject of closer study. If we want to analyse the issue of national populism in more detail, we must focus our attention on individual groups of citizens who become the addressees of national-populist ideas. Currently, we see university students as one of the specific groups. University students are not indifferent to current events in society and reflect on most occurrences and processes related to the formation of social relations that influence the present as well as future life. For this reason, we want to learn if and in what way university students reflect on chosen tactics and strategies presented by representatives of national populism.

## NATIONAL POPULISM

According to Oľga Gyárfášová and Grigorij Mesežnikov (2008) “the term ‘national populism’ is used to indicate political activities (in its various manifestations), aiming to address voters through traditional populist methods with the application of a strong ethnic-national element” (p. 7). On this basis, we can say that national populism is most frequently connected with the area of politics. Josef Smolík (2018) shows, that it represents political activities characterised by an attempt to address, captivate and

interest members of a particular nation (Smolík, 2018). The addresses of national-populistic representatives are dominated by their emphasis on the importance of belonging to a given nation and the question of preserving national existence characterised by inviolable and lasting independence of the nation. According to Radoslav Štefančík, Miroslav Hvasta and Hans Ulrich Wehler, national-populistic tactics and strategies stem from the premise of a strong affiliation with a particular nation felt by its individual members (Štefančík-Hvasta, 2019; Wehler, 2001). National awareness of individual members of a nation may be considered a necessary condition for the spread and persistence of national populism in politics.

The following signs define national populism in more detail (Michvočíková, 2021, pp. 20-21):

The simplicity of language – means of expression addressed to broad sections of the population which are based on using not very complicated language. Simple phrases reflecting the position of members of a particular nation in contemporary society are becoming important expressions of national populism. These relatively uncomplicated means of expression, at the same time, promote and suggest elemental national characteristics through common, generally used expressions that may be understood by most recipients.

Application of a mobilisation policy – a mobilisation policy, calling for a change in society can emphasise the necessity of transforming the arrangement of basic socio-economic relationships. The stated changes in the socio-economic relationships are based on emphasising the importance of belonging to a particular nation. At the same time, the requirements of the members of the nation are promoted at the expense of other nationalities – minorities or ethnic groups living in the territory of the state.

Charismatic leader – a charismatic leader represents a key element participating in the process of spreading the ideas of populism. A concrete person labelled as the leader plays a significant role in the promoting and subsequent spreading of ideas of national populism; this leader can interest, engage and thus address the majority of addressees – members of a particular nation. A charismatic leader is a person that can captivate a given group of people through his/her addresses as well as his/her activities, which focus on highlighting the importance of the nation's position in society. This way the leader gains sympathisers who support and promote the ideas of national populism in the society.

The stated signs supplement and extend the general characteristic of national populism described above. According to Grigorij Mesežnikov and Oľga Gyarfášová (2008), it is typical for national populists in Slovakia to take a stand on issues from the following thematic areas regarding the status and perspectives of intercultural dialogue (p. 12):

Understanding the basic social arrangement, the dichotomy between “ethnic” and “civic”, choosing the concept of the nation, and political orientation to liberal-democratic values.

National history and its interpretation, emphasising the importance of individual historical periods in the history of the nation, assessment of the national historic events and national historic personas.

The relationship to national minorities, the relationship to political representation of the largest minority, the issue of Slovak-Hungarian historical reconciliation, the realisation of minority rights in the area of mother tongue, culture and schooling.

The relationship of ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia to Hungary as their mother country (the cultural-language sense).

In our opinion, some of the areas of interest for Slovak representatives of national populism should be conceived in more general terms. The way society is developing and mainly, the processes of migratory and integratory character provide the representatives of national populism in Slovakia with opportunities for pointing out apparent threats to the Slovak nation from the members of national minorities in general. It is the apparent threat to our sovereignty by other minorities as well as the threat to the independent existence of the Slovak nation, which are both currently the most frequent topics of the representatives of Slovak national populism. In recent years, national-populistic strategies and activities stemmed mainly from individual representatives' (charismatic leaders') ideas related to the Slovak-Hungarian relations resulting from the historical development of both nations. Nowadays, however, we need to call the readers' attention to the fact that the representatives of national populism who are active on the Slovak political scene more often tend to point out the issue of the gradual formation of a multicultural society in Slovakia. The Slovak nation and its independence and sovereignty are thus, according to the addresses of national-populistic character, being threatened by more than one minority.

On the other hand, the addressees of ideas from the realm of national populism should not be left out of our study either. Although the individual tactics or strategies of national populists are oriented towards broad sections of citizens belonging to a particular nation, we consider it necessary to focus on university students, who may be characterised as a large group of citizens. University students are characterised by a specific lifestyle, within which the personality of the persons in question is being developed (Sirotová, 2010; Slavík, 2012). Students' participation in educational processes at a university is the very factor that plays an important role in their personality development. Inna Lyvitska (2021) says that university education usually involves the active interaction of students with university teachers as well as with other students. These interactions in many cases include discussions related to current social events and focus on social development not only on a global scale but also in their own country or the country they are studying in (Lyvitska, 2021). We may safely state that the issue of national populism belongs among the current affairs in Slovak society and based on this, it is equally safe

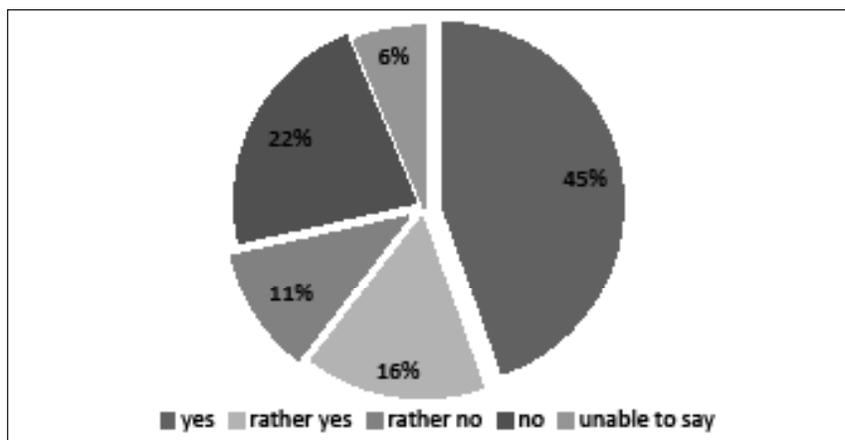
to suppose that individual strategies and tactics of the representatives of national populism do not go unnoticed by university students.

## THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

For the empirical research of the issue, a quantitative approach has been used. Students studying at universities in the Slovak Republic have been addressed via a questionnaire prepared in advance. The questionnaire contained closed questions focusing on the study of issues related to the area of national populism.

Recorded answers of sixty-seven university students studying in the Slovak Republic have been analysed via first-degree data sorting. The main objective of our study was to find out whether the participating students were inclined to support addresses of a national-populistic character presented by Slovak political representatives.

Through the analysis and interpretation of recorded answers, we have analysed to what extent university students participating in our study consider it important for political representatives to present the interests of the Slovak nation in their addresses. Based on the recorded answers, we may state that 45% of the respondents demonstrated the greatest importance of presenting the interests of the Slovak nation by political representatives. 16% of the university students see the presentation of the interests of the Slovak nation by political representatives as rather important. According to 22% of addressed university students studying at universities in the Slovak Republic, political representatives should not present the interests of the Slovak nation in their addresses and other activities. The abovementioned findings are illustrated in the following graphical representation (Figure 1).



*Fig. 1. Presenting the Interests of the Slovak Nation by Political Representatives*

Source: own research.

By summarising the recorded answers, we may note that for the majority of the addressed university students in Slovakia, presenting the interests of the Slovak nation is seen as an important aspect of political activity related to the national existence. The stated findings can be substantiated mainly via current global affairs. Young people – university students – are usually interested in what is going on in the world, but mainly in the country where they spend their everyday lives. What comes to the fore in recent years are issues related to the position of members of individual nations in the increasingly multicultural society. The stated idea of a threat and the subsequent questionable or problematic preservation of national existence, thus, become the centre of attention for some political representatives trying to gain popularity among the members of a given nation. In their addresses, political representatives emphasise the threat to the independent existence of a given nation. The stated threat does not go unnoticed by the members of the nation who usually see the solution to the situation in the activities presented by those very politicians. Based on the presented threat to the existence of the independent Slovak nation, students participating in our research also reflect on the issue and try to think of potential solutions that could contribute to the preservation of the independent existence of the Slovak nation. Some of the political representatives who are active on the Slovak political scene present the interests of the Slovak nation in their addresses while linking the topic with the issue of preserving our national existence in the future. These representatives gain popularity among broad sections of citizens, that is also among university students.

The second research area of the explorative part of our study is university students' collective reflection of national populism. Since national populism in Slovakia is represented mainly by politicians' addresses emphasising the importance of the Slovak nation's existence from various points of view, we wanted to find out if the stated area is a part of the university students' collective discussions.

Table 1  
*University Students' Discussions about Politicians' Addresses Focusing on the Slovak Nation*

<i>Do you have discussions with other students about politicians' addresses focusing on the Slovak nation?</i>	<i>frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	10	15.40
partly yes	26	38.12
partly no	5	7.00
No	13	19.21
Can't say	4	5.66
No answer	9	14.60

Source: own research

Based on the data in the table above (see Table 1), we can state that most addressed university students hold discussions with each other about politicians' addresses focusing on the Slovak nation. Approximately 15% of the respondents replied to the question with an unequivocal assent, while 38% of the respondents sometimes discuss the issue with other students. On the other hand, we would like to point out that 19% of the university students expressed an unequivocal negative position on the issue, which means that they do not discuss with other students the national-populistic addresses of politicians. The findings may be substantiated by stating that current affairs on the Slovak political scene often include national-populistic speeches. It is, therefore, safe to suppose that most university students pay attention to what's happening on the Slovak political scene.

## DISCUSSION

In a contemporary democratic society, party politics is an important factor that influences the character of basic social relations. We consider national populism an inseparable part of the area of politics. Attempting to gain political popularity is, in our opinion, a significant characteristic of national populism. These attempts include a broad spectrum of political activities, whose common denominator becomes the constant emphasising of the importance of preserving national existence. The terminology presented by national populists who try to draw people's attention to potential threats to the nation represents the basic pillar of speeches and other addresses of national populists, which are directed toward broad sections of citizens belonging to a particular nation. When studying the addressees of ideas and strategies of national populism in more detail, we need to pay increased attention to a specific group of recipients – university students. University students represent a group of citizens who are in the process of gaining a certain level of education while possessing general knowledge that enables them to participate in certain decision-making processes in society. In this way, these educated individuals tend to have a more complex understanding of the social order and through their decisions can, at least partially, influence and shape elemental social relations. As a result, university students and their view of chosen aspects of national populism should not be left out of a more detailed analysis of the issue at hand. As the topic has not been sufficiently examined in Slovakia, it is necessary to start with a general analysis of national-populistic ideas in contemporary Slovak society, their spreading and persistence. We have found out that most addressed university students studying at Slovak universities have not expressed a negative view of presenting the interests of the Slovak nation by political representatives. Young people, in this case, university students participating in our research are, to a great extent, aware of their national affiliation and see the importance of the Slovak nation's existence

and preservation. On the other hand, we believe that the respondents lack a relevant and expert view of the issue of national populism through the optics of a university educator who would (via his/her expert opinion) help students to identify undesired national-populistic tactics and strategies.

## CONCLUSION

In the theoretical prerequisites of this theoretical-empirical study, we have briefly identified national populism as a part of the area of politics. We may talk about political strategies and activities through which political representatives seek to gain popularity with as many citizens as possible. If, in their attempts to gain supporters, political representatives utilise strategies and tactics that emphasise affiliation with a particular nation, we talk about national populism. At the same time, if we want to identify national populism in speeches, strategies, and activities of political representatives, it is necessary for politicians to not only emphasise the affiliation to a particular nation but also point out the relationship of the majority nation to national minorities and at the same time, pay attention to the historical context of the nation's formation highlighted mainly through important historical periods or persons.

On the Slovak political scene, the ideas of national populism are inseminated mainly among the members of the Slovak nation, including, naturally, the group of university students. Respondents of our research believe that political representatives need to represent the interests of the Slovak nation, and this finding may be substantiated mainly by the fact that university education does not provide students with expert-level information on the topic.

In conclusion, we can say that the addressed university students reflect on the issue of national populism on the Slovak political scene. Even though the respondents' answers point out the importance of thematising the position of the nation in political representatives' speeches, it is necessary to differentiate between political addresses of such nature and tactics or strategies that dishonour or suppress the existence of national minorities in certain societies or around the world. For this reason, university students should acquire expert knowledge of the issue as part of their university education; this way we will make sure that the future generation of educated people would be able to recognise the undesired suppression of the rights of national minorities in the national-populistic addresses of political representatives. As we consider the issue of national populism and its manifestations a very acute part of contemporary Slovak society, we believe it is necessary to propose certain possibilities to further study the topic, mainly when it relates to the group of university students. A more detailed study of university students' opinions related to their view of national populism and its manifestations in Slovakia should be, in our opinion, supplemented

by a qualitative study, using in-depth interviews. The qualitative design of the research will help us to understand students' opinions in a more complex way when it comes to their support of national populism and its political representatives.

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