



## SOCIAL-CONSERVATIVE RUSSIAN SOFT POWER: A TRADITIONAL AGENDA AND ILLIBERAL VALUES AS A SOURCE OF ATTRACTION OR COERTION? A CASE STUDY OF SLOVAKIA

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### Abstract:

The ongoing polarization of European society in the political-ideological context is apparent. This polarization causes considerable tension in society. Sophisticated soft power based on political values and policies that Russia has been using against the West especially since 2012 is a power struggle for people's minds and souls. Russia does not only try to undercut faith in Europe and its institutions among its citizens, but it also aims to offer a "better" alternative. There is an increasing effort to create an alternative value universe against the "nihilist" and "decadent" West – not only in Russia but also in the whole World. There is quite a visible ambition from the Russian side to become the "illiberal" world leader. This contribution has been drawn up in the context of this urgent issue. The article examines whether Russian soft power fulfils the criteria of attractiveness or just coercion, and what Russia is pursuing by promoting this form of power.

**Keywords:** Russia, Slovakia, Central Europe, illiberal values, conservatism, traditionalism

**Título en Castellano:** *El poder blando ruso social-conservador: ¿Una agenda tradicional y valores antiliberales como fuente de atracción o coacción? Un estudio de caso de Eslovaquia*

### Resumen:

*La actual polarización de la sociedad europea en el contexto político-ideológico es evidente. Esta polarización causa una tensión considerable en la sociedad. El sofisticado poder blando basado en los valores políticos y las políticas que Rusia ha estado utilizando contra Occidente, especialmente desde 2012, es una lucha de poder para las mentes y las almas de las personas. Rusia no sólo trata de socavar la fe en Europa y sus instituciones entre sus ciudadanos, sino que también pretende ofrecer una alternativa "mejor". Hay un esfuerzo cada vez mayor por crear un universo de valores alternativos contra el Occidente "nihilista" y "decadente", no sólo en Rusia sino en todo el mundo. Hay una ambición bastante visible por parte de Rusia de convertirse en el líder mundial "antiliberal". Esta contribución ha sido elaborada en el contexto de este tema urgente. El artículo examina si el poder blando ruso cumple con los criterios de atracción o simplemente de coerción, y qué persigue Rusia al promover esta forma de poder.*

**Palabras Clave:** Rusia, Eslovaquia, Europa Central, valores antiliberales, conservadurismo, tradicionalismo

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, as a result of several factors, a state can develop such activities that lead to its final goal, i. e. the application of its own foreign policy interests in the international system. This opportunity is fulfilled primarily through the promotion of the so-called soft power and instruments defined for this purpose. The soft power phenomenon represents a breakthrough concept in power perception. The engineer of this concept is the American academic Joseph S. Nye, who introduced it in the early nineties. Many researchers in the field of international relations have critically reviewed Nye's concept in the long run and attempt to modify and re-evaluate it. This means that his theory has remained popular and relevant at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. This is despite the fact that the concept involves certain limits and remains underdeveloped in some dimensions.

One of these important limitations is the fact that the concept of soft power is in the long term associated exclusively with the culture and ideas of the West, or Western civilization. In the spirit of Nye's vision, many authors have linked it to the ideas of democracy, human rights, liberalism, the Western lifestyle, which are (or should be) voluntarily accepted and accepted by the public in much of the world. Based on this characteristic, it started being associated primarily with the United States (the US), later with other Western transatlantic powers, including the European Union (the EU), because their political-ideological liberal concept of democracy and Western culture have become a global paradigm.

Around the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, as a result of the rising trend of soft power, this type of power has been identified in states outside the Western sphere. These are primarily regional powers concentrated in an economic grouping, known as the BRICS acronym. These countries are: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, seen as a multipolar alternative to the West. In addition, it is worth mentioning Turkey in the context of soft power creation. These states are attempting to use a variety of soft power tools (but with their own specific modification) to achieve a geopolitical impact that will result in a change in the international system.

This contribution has been written for a clear reason. Last year, the region of Central Europe, specifically the region of the Visegrad Group,<sup>1</sup> commemorated the 30 years since the acquisition of democracy after 40 years of non-freedom and repression by communist regimes controlled by the Soviet Union (the USSR). However, it should be noted with concern that after the initial liberal enthusiasm, illiberal trends, contempt for liberal democracy by politicians and public opinion, and especially the increasingly visible influence of Russia (the successor state of the USSR), are emerging in the region, but also in other parts of Europe, mainly through the already mentioned sophisticated soft power. Russia's promotion of this form of power is, of course, not the only reason for this dangerous inclination towards illiberal values in Central Europe, but it is one of its important elements. Therefore, the aim of the study is to evaluate the potential of Russian soft power in the application to the Central European region, specifically to Slovakia. Derived from this goal is a research question: Can today's Russia create and promote soft power in Slovakia, which shows signs of attraction and follow-up, or is it just a form of coercive force?

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<sup>1</sup> There are several expert opinions on which states belong or do not belong to the ambiguous region of Central Europe. In the present study, the term "Central Europe" is used for the Visegrad Group, i. e. for the community of four Central European states: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, originally founded on 15 February 1991 by three states, one of which was the now non-existent Czechoslovakia. All the countries in the group had sought EU membership, seeing their integration into the EU as a further step forward in the process of overcoming artificial dividing lines in Europe through cooperation. They achieved this goal on 1 May 2004, when they all became members of the EU.



This study is the result of my long-term research interest in the phenomenon of political power, political ideology, and the Russian power- projection of political aspects vis-à-vis other actors in the international system. It deals with the topic of soft power with a specific focus on Russia. This country creates soft power and subsequently transmits it and, despite the fact that Russian soft power may differ from the Western concept – as Nye himself points out – this does not change the fact that Russia has taken up soft power and is implementing it with visible results. Therefore, the experience of Russia in this regard can undoubtedly contribute to an overall understanding of how different states (including undemocratic and semi-democratic states) adapt and implement the concept of soft power with different connotations.

The main contribution of the study is its ambition to bring a new perspective of perception of soft power, one which has not yet been reflected. The text focuses on one aspect of the promotion of this type of power – political values and policies, namely illiberal social-conservative values. These have not yet been the subject of detailed research in terms of their potential attractiveness to other actors in the international system. It is true that Russian soft power has become the subject of research of several researchers, but this research contained several limits (including a limited focus on the cultural pillar of soft power). The present study wants to transcend this stereotype. The study also deals with the influence of Russian soft power on the region of Central Europe, specifically in Slovakia. In particular, the post-Soviet region has long been the subject of numerous studies in the context of Russian soft power, but the research has not, in principle, focused on other localities.

## 2. Research design and methodology

In this study, a qualitative methodology was chosen, specifically the method of a one-case study. The very concept of soft power can no longer, by its very nature, rely on purely quantitative, statistical data that is typical of hard power. This concept, stemming from the power of culture, values and ideas, is difficult to quantify and requires in-depth analysis. Soft power, i. e. the ability to achieve what we want thanks to the attractiveness of the country's culture, political ideas and the country's policy as such, is difficult to calculate or measure accurately. This fact is perceived as one of the biggest shortcomings of soft power. For this reason, this qualitative study is supplemented by partial quantitative indicators. This is not unusual. As Ženka and Kofroň say, “qualitative studies commonly operate with numbers, just as quantitative studies operate with verbal concepts.”<sup>2</sup> According to both authors, the reason for including numerical data, especially in case of qualitative studies, is the ambition to investigate the problem “quite in detail with an effort to bring a relatively large amount of information about it.”<sup>3</sup>

This is also the case in this study, which examines the phenomenon of Russian soft power, relying not only on qualitative data but also on numerical (quantitative) data obtained from various available public opinion polls or statistics. With this approach, my ambition is: first, to avoid subjectivity and the inability to provide measurable results, which often do not appear in qualitative research. Second, to demonstrate the potential seriousness and overall impact of Russian soft power on Slovak conditions. In other words, I seek to “substantiate” the subjective perception of soft power.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, this approach refutes the widely used

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<sup>2</sup> Ženka, Ján and Kofroň, Ján (2012): *Metodologie výzkumu v sociální geografii – případové studie*, Ostrava, Ostravská univerzita v Ostravě / Ostrava University, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> However, it should be added that many researchers dealing with the phenomenon of soft power agree that subjective perception cannot be completely separated from soft power. That is why the author of this study does not seek this separation or suppression.



and still persistent misconception that in soft power – as opposed to military or economic power – the relationship between the use of force and the result is not causal enough.

The theory of soft power provides guidance for working in the specific case of relations between Russia and Slovakia. In this case study, the article tries to find elements of soft power in Russian behavior towards Slovakia and to understand the reasons for using soft power in practice, the possibilities of its use and its overall role in the politics of a particular actor within a specified case. From the point of view of the research design, it is therefore a disciplined interpretive study and a specific type of one-case study.

A disciplined interpretive study is defined as follows: “A phenomenon that we consider worthy of study for its uniqueness or significance can be chosen as a case, but an existing theory that has not yet been applied to the phenomenon is used to examine it. The theory only serves as a guide for identifying the main processes and variables within the case. Thus, the case does not serve as a tool for working with a theory, but on the contrary, theory guides the work with cases.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, this theoretical study can reveal its usefulness in practice, the limits, the overall benefits and the possibilities for its further development.

This study aims to make a contribution to the existing (but relatively vaguely applied) soft power theory of Joseph S. Nye with a proposal for its improvement (supplementation), as a new research topic (Russian soft power) has brought new perspectives for modification of the existing theory. The selected case is considered adequate and appropriate because of its uniqueness and meaning, but at the same time because the existing specific theories have not been applied so far to this specific research.

The present case meets the criteria of sufficient period and thematic boundaries and is interesting enough and unique in itself.<sup>6</sup> In this study, relations between Russia and Slovakia are structured, focusing on the period from 2013 (Russian soft power begins to penetrate sharply to Europe and reaches also Slovakia) to February 2020 (end of the term of office in Slovakia 2016-2020 and the election to the National Council of Slovak Republic – the NC SR, thus to the Slovak parliament). This time limit is related to the beginning of the conscious efforts to use political values to influence Slovakia.

This case was chosen because its study has been relatively neglected and constitutes a unique situation for which it is difficult to find a parallel. Academic writings deal either with Russia's soft power as such and how it operates on the international scene, or examine Russia-Slovakia relations from other perspectives (economic or energy).

For doing this article we have collected the most relevant sources of information available related to the issues to be researched. Subsequently, an exhaustive classification and analysis of the information gathered has been carried out. After a critical evaluation of the data, the resulting findings were complemented with the author's opinions and data from other field studies conducted between 2015 and 2019 in Russia, Slovakia and the U.S. The author attempts to answer the research questions through the study of primary and secondary sources, documents, and other writings published in Russian, Slovak and English, formulating general conclusions from partial findings.

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<sup>5</sup> Kořan Michal: “Jednopřípadová studie“, in Drulák, Petr; Karlas, Ján (ed.) (2008): *Jak zkoumat politiku*, Praha, Portál, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



### **3. Theoretical part: The concept of soft power according to Joseph S. Nye**

In his groundbreaking 2004 publication *Soft Power: The Means to Success In World Politics* Nye states that “sometimes you can get the outcomes you want without tangible threats or payoffs. The indirect way to get what you want has sometimes been called ‘the second face of power’”<sup>7</sup> This type of power rests on the ability to influence the preferences of others by non-violent and non-coercive, i. e. “soft” means. “A Country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions.”<sup>8</sup> Nye writes “this soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.”<sup>9</sup> and its “effectiveness is measured by minds changed (as shown in interviews or polls), not dollars spent or slick production packages produced.”<sup>10</sup>

This “underlines the importance of a change in the beliefs of the object of influence. This means, however, that the change in preferences must necessarily be based on a voluntary and free will of the object of influence as a necessary condition, which we consider crucial in Nye's concept of soft power. In its assumptions, it thus excludes any coercion.”<sup>11</sup> By influencing preferences, it is thus possible to influence behaviour, i. e. to enforce power.

For the sake of completeness, it is necessary to clarify that hard power (command power) is, on the contrary, a type of power that represents the simplest and fastest way to assert one's own interests. Crucially, one actor has the ability to persuade another actor to change his or her original approach and strategy. The power of one actor on another has a direct effect. Hard power is historically older. It has dominated international relations for most of history and has been reflected in phenomena such as wars and armed conflicts. It therefore manifests itself - in comparison with soft power - in a much more practical and concrete way.

Hard power refers to “the use of force, payment, and some agenda-setting based on them.”<sup>12</sup> This type of power is defined by Nye as “the ability to use ‘the carrots and sticks’<sup>13</sup> of economic and military might to make others follow your will.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, hard power rests on the ability of countries to achieve preferred outcomes through the use of force, money or threats and is intuitively associated with the possession of tangible military and economic resources and their conversion into powerful behaviour. Nye splits hard power resources into “basic” power resources (territory, population size and literacy rate), military power and economic power.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that, in the context of hard power, today in the globalized information age, the usefulness of classical military power is declining (compared to the economic component of power), Nye logically notes that “war and force may be down, but they are not

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<sup>7</sup> Nye, Joseph S. (2004): *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, New York, PublicAffairs, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Nye, Joseph S. (2011): *The Future of Power*, New York, PublicAffairs, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Meričková, Laura: “Mäkká a tvrdá moc – o vybraných otázkach posudzovania kritérií mäkkej moci”, *Medzinárodné vzťahy/Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, nº. 2 (June 2014), p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> See Nye, *The Future...*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase “carrot and stick” is a metaphor for the use of a combination of reward and punishment to induce a desired behaviour. The carrot in this context could be the promise of economic or diplomatic aid between nations, while the stick might be the threat of military action.

<sup>14</sup> Nye, Joseph S: “Propaganda Isn't the Way: Soft power“, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 10 January 2003, at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/propaganda-isnt-way-soft-power> .

<sup>15</sup> See Nye, *The Future...*, *op. cit.*, p. 157.



out. Instead, the use of force is taking new forms. Military theorists today write about 'fourth generation warfare' that sometimes has 'no definable battlefields or fronts'; indeed, the distinction between civilian and military may disappear."<sup>16</sup> This type of war is commonly called "war among the people". "In such hybrid wars, conventional and irregular forces, combatants and civilians, and physical destruction and information warfare become thoroughly intertwined"<sup>17,18</sup>.

"The soft power of a country rests heavily on three basic resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)."<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, this study focuses on political values and policies (which should also be reflected in foreign policy) as sources of soft power, not culture.

### **3.1. Domestic values and policies as a source of soft power**

The values that govern the state in national politics affect its image and legitimacy in the eyes of other actors, which in turn can affect the state's ability to successfully pursue its foreign policy. Unlike hard power, not all sources of soft power are exclusively in the hands of the state. After all, Nye himself prefers openness and "dyscontrol", that is, unnecessary non-interference by the state in the exercise of soft power. However, domestic and foreign policy are elements that are within the sphere of influence of a given state. Political values thus consist of values based on the style of government and political organization within the state, which are perceived positively by other foreign actors.

Nye presents that domestic values are promoted by political leaders of a given country for various reasons (pragmatism or personal beliefs) and can be a source of attractiveness and at the same time strongly influence the preferences of other actors in international relations, who then take them over. All this is fundamentality demonstrated by the fact that they represent, above all, a certain arrangement and character of the system of government of a given country. At the same time, this also brings about a support for these values, or as the case may be, of the policy resulting from these values by soft power recipients. The Harvard academic considers them to be a very important aspect of soft power, which contributes significantly to the attractiveness and prestige of the state. Nye argues that there are two factors that generate political attractiveness. First, the state must have political values that reflect universal values. Second, the state must conduct foreign policies based on these universal values. States that can fulfil both of these criteria are likely to have large soft power resources. Conversely, those states whose values and foreign policies are seen as either narrow or parochial are far less likely to produce soft power.<sup>20</sup>

However, public proclamations and promises are not enough, important is their subsequent conversion into practice. Credibility and implementation are key in this case. In this context, Nye writes: "The values a government champions in its behavior at home (for example, democracy), in international institutions (working with others), and in foreign policy (promoting peace and human rights) strongly affect the preferences of others."<sup>21</sup> "If the state can present its values as international standards, it will then allow it to easily convince others

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<sup>16</sup> Nye, Joseph S: "Is Military Power Becoming Obsolete?", Project Syndicate, 11 January 2010, at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/is-military-power-becoming-obsolete?barrier=accesspaylog> .

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Nye in this context writes: "And now technology has brought a new dimension to warfare: the prospect of cyber attacks, by which an enemy — state or non-state — can create enormous physical destruction (or threaten to do so) without an army that physically crosses another state's border" (*Ibid.*)

<sup>19</sup> See Nye, *The Future...*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> See Nye, *Soft...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



of the positives of its action. It does not even have to use any other supporting persuasion tools then, as other actors in the power system consider these values to be natural and universal. By actively participating in the creation of the so-called international political agenda, it can easily influence the wishes and considerations of other states, thus manipulating their preferences.”<sup>22</sup>

However, it is important to note that universal attractiveness is linked by Nye – a long-time U.S. academic - exclusively to liberal-democratic values (liberal democracy, or the promotion of human and civil rights), which she considers to be the most attractive and universal. He argues that „many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive,”<sup>23</sup> and that “political values like democracy and human rights can be powerful sources of attraction.”<sup>24</sup>

However, the author realizes that liberal democratic values will additionally not be attractive to all. Nye notes that “individualism and liberties are attractive to many people, but repulsive to some, particularly fundamentalists.”<sup>25</sup> “Still, Nye does not see non-liberal values as having very much soft power potential and essentially argues for the existence of a ‘silent majority’ of liberal democratic supporters in these countries, who quietly admire Western values despite facing government repression.”<sup>26</sup>

### **3.2. Foreign policy as a source of soft power**

Foreign policy is closely related to domestic values and policies as an important component of soft power. It should be noted that foreign policy is extremely important in the context of a source of soft power. The foreign policy of the state is a set of activities through which the state promotes its (national) interests abroad. As in the case of culture and political values, attractiveness plays a key role in foreign policy. The attractiveness of a country depends to a large extent on the values and culture that are expressed through the substance and style of foreign policy. In other words, culture and especially domestic values are reflected in foreign policy management. According to Nye, a positive foreign policy contributes to the formation of the country’s soft power when “others see them as legitimate and having moral authority.”<sup>27</sup>

In general, foreign policy, which is based on broadly inclusive and far-sighted definitions of national interest, tends to be simpler and at the same time more attractive to others than a type of foreign policy that is short-term and limited in perspective. According to Nye, foreign policy conceptions that have human rights and civic values embedded in them have also a good chance to be widely positively received. In such a case, the assumption increases that the values of these policies will be shared by other actors. An example of an effective and prudent foreign policy that contributes to the legitimization of foreign policy objectives, strengthens the soft power of the state, and which may become attractive to other actors is a policy that incorporates certain elements (such as development aid elements, various support programs such as Marshall Plan, support for democratic principles and human rights in the world, emphasis on international cooperation with other actors in international organizations and the like).

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<sup>22</sup> Flanderová, Linda: “Soft power: mít či nemít”, *Mezinárodní politika*, 30 September 2013, at <https://www.iir.cz/article/soft-power-mit-ci-nemit>.

<sup>23</sup> See Nye, *Soft...*, *op. cit.*, p. X.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Kaczmarek, Katarzyna and Keating, Vincent: “Conservative soft power: liberal soft power bias and the ‘hidden’ attraction of Russia”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11 May 2017, at [https://pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/files/25621864/Conservative\\_Soft\\_Power\\_Liberal\\_soft\\_pow\\_PURE.pdf](https://pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/files/25621864/Conservative_Soft_Power_Liberal_soft_pow_PURE.pdf), p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> See Nye, *The Future...*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.



On the contrary, according to the American academic, an increased degree of arrogance, aggression, hypocrisy or excessive unilateralism in the foreign policy of an actor can seriously damage not only his soft power, but also disrupt the very image of the country abroad. A clear proof of this was the military intervention in Iraq in 2003 by a “coalition of the willing” led by the U.S. and the United Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> In addition, in the context of soft power and foreign policy, Nye notes that unilateralism in foreign policy can be costly and less effective, while a multilateralist approach usually helps to legitimize state power and thus generate soft power.<sup>29</sup> It follows that foreign policy can act both as a source of soft power but also as an element that can “undermine soft power.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **4. Soft power in the Russian environment – possible approaches**

As mentioned in the introduction, the modern phenomenon of soft power appeared in Russian discourse relatively late (compared to the conditions in the West), specifically in the first half of the first decade of the 21st century. According to many experts, this interest was mainly related to events in the post-Soviet region, specifically the “colour revolutions” (Ukraine, Georgia, or Kyrgyzstan), i. e. civil protests calling for change, the resignation of oligarchic and former influential Soviet officials (presidents, prime ministers) with undemocratic, or semi-democratic tendencies, who ruled in most states of the post-Soviet space.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the “colour revolutions”, the Russian regime had to deal with other significant events. Between the revolutionary events in Georgia (November-December 2003) and Ukraine (December 2004), in March 2004, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) saw the largest enlargement by seven Central and Eastern European countries in May 2004, the EU grew by ten states in its largest enlargement so far. This whole sequence of processes was perceived by Kremlin not only as a threat to Russian interests,<sup>32</sup> but also as a failure of Russian foreign policy. These events subsequently sparked a serious intellectual debate and later implementation steps regarding soft power by influential Russian academics and politicians.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See Nye, *Soft...*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Solik, Martin and Baar, Vladimír: “Koncept ‘Ruského sveta’ ako nástroj implementácie soft power v ruskej zahraničnej politike”, *Časopis Politické vedy*, vol. 19, n° 1 (March 2016), pp. 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> Oleksii Polegkyi points to two different interpretations of the “Orange” revolution in Ukraine at the end of 2004: “the West impression was that this was a spontaneous democratic rising. The Russian perception was that it was a well-prepared operation to foment an anti-Russian and pro-American uprising in Ukraine.”

(Polegkyi, Oleksii: “Changes in Russian foreign policy discourse and concept of ‘Russian World’”, Pecob’s Paper Series, 16 October 2011, at [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=2ahUKewiP-f-TlonpAhW\\_SxUIHeoLA1cQFjABegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdoc.anet.be%2Fdocman%2Fdocman.phtml%3Ffile%3D.irua.a3e907.139593.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3NVya6w6bqxhdxcsuNQ8JS](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=2ahUKewiP-f-TlonpAhW_SxUIHeoLA1cQFjABegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdoc.anet.be%2Fdocman%2Fdocman.phtml%3Ffile%3D.irua.a3e907.139593.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3NVya6w6bqxhdxcsuNQ8JS), p. 11. Jeanne L. Wilson adds that “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet area “were seen as a consequence of the soft power activities of the West and ultimately a threat to the maintenance of Russian sovereignty” (Wilson, Jeanne L: “Russia and China Respond to Soft Power: Interpretation and Readaptation of a Western Construct”, *Politics*, vol. 35, n° 3-4 (November 2015), p. 291) in Russian interpretations.

<sup>33</sup> In 2007, the Russkiy Mir Foundation was established by a decree of Russian President Putin, and in 2008, a bureaucratic federal agency with roots in the USSR called Rossotrudnichestvo was reorganized. The goals of both organizations were focused on: teaching and promoting the Russian language and culture, or carrying out study stays for foreign students in the spirit of cultural soft power (See Solik and Baar, *Koncept...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38). Russian Presidents Putin and Medvedev have repeatedly emphasized (primarily at Russian diplomatic meetings) the need for their country to “strengthen and consolidate its ‘soft power’.”

Minzarari, Dumitru: *Soft Power with an Iron Fist: Putin Administration to Change the Face of Russia’s Foreign Policy Toward Its Neighbors*, The Jamestown Foundation, 10 September 2012, at

<https://jamestown.org/program/soft-power-with-an-iron-fist-putin-administration-to-change-the-face-of-russias-foreign-policy-toward-its-neighbors/>). The soft power strategy was subsequently refined into the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation of February 2013, where the term soft power is mentioned as an increasingly important tool in Russian foreign policy. The concept shows soft power as “a comprehensive toolkit



After 2004, the Russian discourse was full of debates over Russia's soft power. Many prominent Russian intellectuals (Konstantin Kosachev, Alexander Lukin, or Gleb Pavlovsky) called for the involvement of soft power in foreign policy strategy.

In the context of soft power instruments and as a reaction on "Orange revolution" and election of pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko as a president of Ukraine in 2004, "Moscow reserved the right to pursue its goals by establishing relations with political forces, opposition as well as governing, in post-Soviet countries. Moreover, Pavlovsky's remarks suggested that Russian authorities intend to compete in the civil-society arena by using their tame or government-created NGOs."<sup>34</sup>

Based on Nye's concept of soft power and following Russian domestic and foreign policy, it can be stated that there are two principled views on today's Russian soft power. First, the majority view, held by Nye himself, is the belief that Russia simply cannot create a standard soft power, because it produces exclusively hard or sharp power. Nye, considering the context of soft power exclusively focused on liberal values, declares in his 2013 paper that "illiberal powers" such as China and Russia cannot generate soft power without first adopting liberal norms. He adds that both countries mentioned "will need to match words and deeds in their policies, be self-critical, and unleash the full talents of their civil societies"<sup>35</sup> in order to develop their soft power. According to him, soft power is not strictly based on the state (management and control of the dispersion of this power), but it also requires a functioning civil society, i. e. openness, but also a certain "dyscontrol". He argued that there was no comprehensive instrument to effectively coordinate all elements of soft power and to help integrate them effectively into foreign policy. However, within the framework of "conscious management", the Kremlin seeks to build, improve and control the process of soft power overly actively – especially in the cultural field.<sup>36</sup>

This view has been taken over from the beginning by other (Western) intellectuals and remains overwhelming to this day. Magda Leichtova for instance notes that Russia "possesses almost no political soft power for its neighbors or partners."<sup>37</sup> Agnia Grigas similarly argues that "Russia's influence does not display the emphasis on legitimacy and moral authority stipulated by Nye."<sup>38</sup> Other author have suggested that Russia is out of touch with global values, repeating Nye's argument that soft power works best when it reflects purely liberal values (as synonymous with universality).

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for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy, is becoming an indispensable component of modern international relations. At the same time, increasing global competition and the growing crisis potential sometimes creates a risk of destructive and unlawful use of 'soft power' and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad." ("Kontsepsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii utverzhdena Prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putinyem 12 Fevralya 2013 g.", Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 18 February 2013, at [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186)).

<sup>34</sup> See Polegkyi, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Nye, Joseph S: "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Leichtova, Magda (2014): *Misunderstanding Russia: Russian Foreign Policy and the West*, Farnham, Ashgate, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Grigas, Agnia: *Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States*, Chatham House, 1 August 2012, at [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0812bp\\_grigas.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0812bp_grigas.pdf).



In addition to “liberal bias”, this first approach to viewing soft power suffers from two other key shortcomings. Scholars analyze Russian soft power in overly instrumentalist ways, that is, they presume that Russian soft power must be linked to an active strategy about what the Russian government does or plans to do: there is no conceptual space to consider how Russian values might be attractive unto themselves. From this perspective, soft power is only generated by Russian policy endorsed by the regime and financed from the state budget. In addition, when the Russian soft power literature does not completely dismiss the possibility of Russian soft power altogether, it exclusively focuses on the culture pillar of soft power. This analytical setup prioritizes instrumental understandings of Russian soft power, since the possibility that Russian political values might be attractive unto themselves has been cognitively eliminated.<sup>39</sup>

However, Katarzyna Kaczmarek and Vincent Keating are very critical of this approach. They state: “although Nye technically allows for a wide range of political values to be soft power resources, in practice he comes back time and again to one particular source: liberal democratic values... This assumption is then repeated throughout the literature on soft power: no other set of values can be conceptualized as being attractive; no other set of values could possibly spread beyond its narrow cultural setting. This uncritical belief in liberal democratic values leads to a particular type of empirical blindness: the inability to see non-liberal political values as potentially attractive. This consequently has serious consequences in our estimation of Russian soft power capabilities.”<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, there are recent views that adherents of the first approach to soft power have underestimated, the importance of illiberal (social-conservative, nationalist or traditionalist) values, which can become a significant source of attractiveness in those parts of the world where the liberal form of democracy has no historical background, and on the one hand in those parts of the world in which the crisis of liberal democracy, or crisis of a democratic state exists. This fact is pointed out in particular by the aforementioned Kaczmarek and Keating, who believe that “most considerations of soft power make an implicit and, from our point of view, incorrect assumption that soft power may only be derived from a pool of liberal values. Conversely, the authoritarian practices and normative conservatism of governments such as Russia must only be corrosive of soft power capabilities.”<sup>41</sup>

Both authors detach themselves from the perception of Russian soft power from a purely instrumentalist point of view and openly write about Russia’s illiberal soft power, which is based on authoritarian and social-conservative values and which contains previously unrecognizable effects of soft power. These effects are manifested not only in other authoritative, or semi-authoritarian states, but also among growing populist, social-conservative and radical-left political subjects and voters in liberal Western democracies, or EU countries. In other words, the authors say that a certain group of actors in the international system considers Russia’s “illiberal” domestic values and policies to be attractive, worthy to be followed, and Russia itself as a leader in promoting these values. In addition, this group of actors support the legitimacy and moral authority of the Russian controversial foreign policy, which reflects Russian domestic values and policies.

In this case, Kaczmarek and Keating rely on Nye’s findings<sup>42</sup> as well as on other academics, such as Laura Roselle (advice to concentrate exclusively on the reception side of

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<sup>39</sup> See Kaczmarek and Keating, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Nye gives several reasons why soft power can lead to political influence. Soft power can grant legitimacy and moral authority to foreign policy objectives. This, in turn, increases the possibility of persuasion and lowers the cost of leadership because others will see themselves as having a duty to ensure the success of these values (See Nye, *Soft...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 2,6,7,11). It can also lead states to emulate this attractiveness, changing their preferences.



soft power rather than on the production side), or Valentina Feklyunina (the reception side of soft power is not going to be homogeneous within any state. Different domestic actors will respond differently to Russian political values and it is not necessary for the state as a whole to respond positively to argue that Russian soft power is having an effect).<sup>43</sup>

According to Nye, one way of gauging the effect of soft power within a population is “by using polls and focus groups”<sup>44</sup> to understand the attractiveness of another state. However, as Christopher Layne points out, there is a missing causal link between favourable public opinion and favourable foreign policy outcomes, that “public opinion does not make foreign policy, the state’s central decision makers do.”<sup>45</sup> In this context, Kaczmarska and Keating continue “while public opinion polls and other mass-articulation of support for Russian values are no doubt part of the picture, we propose that the effects of soft power are also reflected in the articulated beliefs of political actors. These are good signals for Russian soft power because the discourse of political elites is not costless, that is, the discursive choices politicians make can end up helping or hurting them. In supporting positions that might attract international derision, such as admiration for Russian conservative values and/or calls for followership, political elites signal either their personal belief in the ideology, or at least a belief that it will have some domestic political resonance. The argument for the existence of Russian soft power is further strengthened if, as Feklyunina suggests, there is a high degree of admiration and/or followership across many different conservative discourses emanating from Russia. Finally, in accordance with Nye’s theory, if these pro-ideological positions are also accompanied by support for controversial Russian foreign policies, then we have our last piece of evidence that Russian soft power is in play.”<sup>46</sup>

In his dissertation, this author defined several categories of Russian illiberal domestic values, which are interconnected and which form the core of illiberal Russian soft power. It is a defense of traditional socio-conservative Christian values, including the promotion of heteronormativity; promoting Russia’s “sovereign” democracy, a “special model” of Russian democracy; support for nationalism; purposeful discrediting of a liberal-minded civil society and, conversely, support for civic groups loyal to the Kremlin; the presentation of president Putin as a strong charismatic leader who is at odds with the weak, bureaucratic and democratic leaders in the West; promoting the mythical cult of Russian “anti-fascism”, which – following historical developments – has always celebrated success, especially among the European political left.<sup>47</sup> In this article, socio-conservative values will be addressed as an important element of the Russian illiberal model.

#### **4.1. Socio-conservative values as a key Russian illiberal value**

One of the most important categories within Russia’s illiberal political values (within the promotion of soft power) is the emphasis and promotion of social-conservative values. At the very beginning of this chapter, it is necessary to define the very term “social conservatism” in order to avoid possible confusion and misunderstandings. Russian conservatism is quite different from conservatism in the West or the Anglo-Saxon environment. Western, conservatism is largely linked to Anglo-Saxon liberalism, as Anglo-Saxon liberalism

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This can create followership (*Ibid.*, pp. 5, 14), or help to set and manipulate the agenda by making opposing preferences of other states seem too unrealistic (*Ibid.*, pp. 7).

<sup>43</sup> See Kaczmarska and Keating, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> Layne Christopher: “The unbearable lightness of soft power”, in Parmar, Inderjeet; Cox, Michael (ed.) (2010): *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, p. 56.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> See Kaczmarska and Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Solik, Martin (2018): *Strategický potenciál ruskej mäkkej moci – Dizertačná práca*, Ostrava, Ostravská univerzita v Ostrave / Ostrava University, pp. 271-272.



(especially British liberalism) is based on empiricism, thus meaning on experience, which is not contradictory to conservative traditions. Anglo-Saxon conservatism is more free-spirited and more confident in capitalism, resp. market economy, which has developed in the past in the Western environment. In other words, it focuses more on the economy than on social issues (a strong emphasis on individual freedom and resistance to the expanding role of the state). It is also less skeptical of gradual reforms.<sup>48</sup>

In contrast, the conservatism promoted by the Kremlin represents a specific type of conservatism, combining several elements with which, however, Anglo-Saxon conservatism does not strongly identify. It supports economic intervention with a mixed economy, with a strong nationalist sentiment and social conservatism with its views being largely populist. Russian conservatism as a result opposes libertarian ideals such as the aforementioned concept of economic liberalism found in other conservative movements around the world (especially in the Anglo-Saxon World). This is also because the Russian type of conservatism relies on strong etatism,<sup>49</sup> which is based on a theory that the state apparatus must play an important role in promoting and protecting traditional values such as family, education, morality, hierarchy or natural authority. It does not even avoid state intervention in support of these values. In addition, Russian conservatism is based on its own model of the welfare state. This difference in perceptions of both types of conservatism is key to understanding Russia's anti-Western illiberal power.

In the context of Russian conservatism as one of the main domestic values and policies applicable in Russian soft power, two important factors need to be noted: First, the promotion of the social-conservative agenda began to gradually develop in Russia and was established in the state agenda after president Putin took office (2000), culminating at the beginning of the third term of office of this Russian president in 2012. In this context Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk writes that "Putin's interest in conservative ideas can be explained by domestic considerations: in the aftermath of the mass-scale domestic protests in fall 2011 – early 2012 the regime needed to find new tools to solidify both the society that started questioning the legitimacy of Putin's rule, and the elite. In other words, stunned by the 2011 mainly middle-class, largely pro-Western protests, the Kremlin turned to Russia's more conservative, more xenophobic heartland for support.

This also explains Putin's extended interpretation of sovereignty as not only a political category, but also a spiritual and ideological concept that constitutes an integral part of 'our national character'.<sup>50</sup> This trend has been maintained in principle to this day. Second, a major religious authority in Russia has greatly assisted the Kremlin in shaping and subsequently implementing a conservative agenda since president Putin came to power – the influential Russian Orthodox Church (the ROC). It means, in cultural and social affairs, Putin has collaborated closely with the ROC, which is quite radical and fundamentalist, and which clearly stands against the Western Roman Catholic Church but also against Judaism<sup>51</sup>, i. e. the key pillars referred to by

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<sup>48</sup> Petřík, Lukáš (2008): *Fenomén konzervativní revoluce Margaret Thatcherové a Ronalda Reagana a její ideové základy – Rigorózní práce*, Praha, Univerzita Karlova v Praze / Charles University in Prague, pp. 20-21.

<sup>49</sup> See Solik, Strategický..., *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>50</sup> Makarychev, Andrey and Yatsyk, Alexandra: *A new Russian Conservatism: Domestic Roots and Repercussions for Europe*, CIDOB – Barcelona Centre For International Affairs, June 2014, at [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_93/a\\_new\\_russian\\_conservatism\\_domestic\\_roots\\_and\\_repercussions\\_for\\_europe](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_93/a_new_russian_conservatism_domestic_roots_and_repercussions_for_europe), p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> History offers several concrete examples of the ROC's hostility to Western Christianity, as well as the fanning of the church's fanatical anti-Semitic sentiments in Russian society during the 19th and 20th centuries (See Solik, Strategický..., *op. cit.*, pp. 393-430).

A typical example of the ROC's radicalization and distinctiveness is its attitude towards homosexuality and LGBT groups. Head of the ROC Patriarch Kirill "has often spoken out against homosexuality (as a symbol of Western



the aforementioned Western conservatism.<sup>52</sup> Since the 15th century, after declaring independence, the ROC has considered itself to be the “purest form of Christianity.”<sup>53</sup>

It was in 2012 that the Russian type of conservatism, support for family policy and traditionalism were definitively accepted as part of a vague ideological “illiberal” concept called “Russian civilizationism”. The essence of Russian civilizationism is a “restoration of the great Soviet community orientated against the West,”<sup>54</sup> or more precisely it perceives Russia as a specific civilization, which is definitely not a part of the West. This ideological concept was initially (shortly after the collapse of the USSR) developed as a common platform of supra-ethnic Russian nationalists and communist “apparatchiks”<sup>55</sup> in Russia. Russian radical national-conservative and Orthodox-Christian forces have also gradually joined these two groups.<sup>56</sup> It was a reaction of disagreement with the initial pro-Western ideological and geopolitical vector in Russia. As Jaroslav Kurfürst writes “civilizationism has become an ideological alternative to the soft power of Western values and in the third presidency, the Russian leadership adopted a ‘values war’ tactic with the Western world on the basis that Russia was a morally superior alternative to Western postmodernism.”<sup>57,58</sup>

Russia’s position as a unique independent illiberal civilization, which supports and protects traditional, moral and family values,<sup>59</sup> allows it to reject the immoral civilizational values of the West, or even fight these values. In particular, it is a systematic challenge to the ideology of Western democracy, liberal and conservative (based on Judeo-Christian principles) values, democratic aspects, and civil and human rights (especially the rights of LGBT

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decadence)” (Solik, Martin and Baar, Vladimír: “The Russian Orthodox Church: An Effective Religious Instrument of Russia’s ‘Soft’ Power Abroad”, *Acta Politologica*, vol. 11, n° 3 (October 2019), p. 18).

<sup>52</sup> Judaism together with Roman-Catholic Church are considered to be historical and natural allies of the Western conservatism. According to John Caiazza the overlap between Catholicism and conservatism is derived from the fact that “there is the conservative respect for tradition, that is, the Burkean assumption that any social institution in place for a great length of time and serving many people well has a claim on us. The Catholic Church has contributed an essential and distinctive element to Western civilization in art, literature, music, theology, and philosophy, and—not least—in its spreading of the Christian gospel, which had a civilizing effect on the many peoples of Europe, including those originally thought of as ‘barbarians’.” (Caiazza, John: *American Conservatism and the Catholic Church*, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 8 October 2014, at <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/american-conservatism-and-the-catholic-church/>).

<sup>53</sup> See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

<sup>54</sup> Kurfürst, Jaroslav (2018): *Příběh ruské geopolitiky: Jak se ruská myšlenka zmocnila více než šestiny světa*, Praha, Karolinum, p. 316.

<sup>55</sup> The term apparatchik means: a member of a Communist Party apparatus.

<sup>56</sup> See Kurfürst, *op. cit.*, pp. 316.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>58</sup> This attitude of the Kremlin resulted from several events that took place in Russia and abroad (the “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, protests in Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa – Arab Spring of 2011 and 2012, or massive civic demonstrations in Russia against the ruling regime at the turn of 2011 and 2012), which according to the Kremlin threatened Russia’s strategic interests, and which, according to the Kremlin, were initiated by the West, or specifically the U.S.

<sup>59</sup> Many, not only alternative but even classical (mostly Christian), media present Russia as a model of a state where family values are not only promoted, but also visible, unlike in the “corrupt” West. However, the reality is completely different. Martin Hanus from the *Conservative Daily Postoj* wrote in 2015 (based on available data from *the United Nations*) that Russia’s divorce rate is among the highest in the world, even a third of marriages fail during the first three years. The Russians are also record holders in the number of abortions; even after the tightening of legislation, there are around 900,000 of them per year in Russia (for comparison, in Germany it is around 100,000 per year). So, while there are 7.2 abortions per 1,000 women of childbearing age in Germany, 16.5 in the United Kingdom and 21 abortions in Sweden, and 40 in abortions in Russia. As for the birth rate, the Russians broke historical negative records here as well. Since 1991, Russia’s population has fallen from 149 million to 143 million. If demographic trends were to continue, in 2050 only 123 million people would live in Russia. (Hanus, Martin: *Rodí sa kvôli Putinovi viac Rusov?* Konzervatívny denník Postoj, 2 November 2015, at <https://www.postoj.sk/6767/rodi-sa-kvoli-putinovi-viac-rusov>).



minorities), which the Kremlin considers decadent. In other words, Putin's illiberal narrative contains strong messages addressed to Euro-Atlantic countries who allegedly are "rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual".<sup>60</sup> Civilizationism also allows Russia to form alliances with other "civilization circles" – also radially directed against Western civilization and universalist ideas – especially with Shiite Islamism.<sup>61</sup>

"Moral superiority of Russia over the West as the cornerstone of ideology has gradually seeped into political discourse, justifying, criticizing, and evaluating actions. Western attempts to 'falsify history' of World War II were deemed by Putin as attempts to 'deprive Russia of her moral authority'. Western sanctions against Russia were called 'immoral' by Sergei Naryshkin, chairman of the State Duma; and the 'unjust sanctions' also gave the 'moral right' to Russia to respond to the West in a similar vein. The schism between Russia and the West has gradually become an underlying motive of Putin's speeches and his attempt to position Russia in the geopolitical arena."<sup>62</sup>

This open declaration of a "war of values" by Russia began after 2012 and escalated after March 2014 (after the Russian annexation of Ukrainian Crimea, the destabilization of eastern Ukraine and the subsequent dramatic deterioration of relations between Russia and Western countries). The Kremlin began to define itself radically against the values of liberal democracy and to mobilize the introduction of civilizationist constructs. It can be stated that we are witnessing another Cold War, with the difference that Russia's conflict with the West in this "post-bipolar" struggle began to take on a value and ideological dimension (liberal values vs. illiberal values) instead of a Cold War clash between two dominant political regimes (liberal-democratic regime vs. undemocratic-communist repressive regime). In this context, as in the Cold War, the world is becoming more and more polarized, with Russia's ambition to become a leader in the "illiberal world" and seeking to gain allies and support in this struggle.

In order to "protect" traditional spiritual values and the family and combat liberal "decadent" trends, several social-conservative illiberal laws were adopted in Russia (after the Russian presidential election in March 2012), in which the ROC also took an active part. However, these laws greatly discriminate against different groups in Russian society. Notably well known in this regard, the law was passed almost unanimously by both chambers of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and subsequently signed by the Russian president primarily against LGBT people in June 2013. It was the Russian federal law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values", also known in English-language media as the "gay propaganda law".<sup>63</sup>

The law brought with it a high number of punishments for the LGBT community in Russia, public protesters against the law, a wave of radical homophobic sentiments in Russian society and among Russian politicians, violence and even hate crimes against this minority, in which perpetrators invoked the Russian federal the law. Russia has subsequently been the target

<sup>60</sup> See Makarychev and Yatsyk, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> See Solik and Baar, *Koncept...*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>62</sup> Krekó, Péter; Györi, Lóránt (ed.) (2016): *The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin's Traditional Agenda and the Export of Values to Central Europe*, Budapest, Political Capital Institute, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> As the name suggests, the law does not mention homosexuality directly, as it deals with the term "non-traditional sexual relations." The law was primarily adopted to ensure that children and young people are not influenced by any ideology or culture that promotes homosexuality, in order to protect the traditional family. Another intention was to protect Russian society against the influence of the West, as homosexuality is presented in Russia as "Western propaganda" and the depiction of homosexuality is perceived as a great campaign by the West against Russia and against traditional Russian values in general (See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-182).



of international criticism by human rights organizations, LGBT activists, and especially the Western media, for indirectly criminalizing the LGBT community and its culture.<sup>64</sup>

Other similar measures of the Russian regime expressed in law include, in particular, regulations against non-governmental organizations in Russia and Western non-governmental organizations operating in that country. The Kremlin, and Vladimir Putin himself, considers them dangerous “pseudo-governmental organizations and other structures, which aim – with external support – to destabilize the situation in various countries.”<sup>65</sup> According to him, these organizations also work inside Russia and are funded by Western sources.<sup>66</sup> Shortly after he presented these ideas in his article (a week before the Russian presidential election on March 4, 2012, which he won with an overwhelming majority) in July 2012, Putin signed the Russian “foreign agent” law, thus a law in Russia that requires non-profit organizations that receive foreign donations (from the governments of sovereign states, international organizations, or private individuals) and engage in “political activity”<sup>67</sup> to register and declare themselves as “foreign agents.”<sup>68,69</sup>

Moreover, on May 20, 2015, Putin signed a law against “undesirable” organizations in Russia, thus a law that gives prosecutors the power to extrajudicially declare foreign and international organizations “undesirable” in Russia and shut them down. The difference from the 2012 and 2015 law is that while the law on “foreign agents” applies to Russian NGOs, the law on “undesirable” organizations applies primarily to foreign organizations operating in Russia or providing support to local NGOs in Russia.<sup>70,71</sup> The law was aimed primarily at the activities of influential Western NGOs operating in Russia – Open Society Foundation and Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation<sup>72</sup> financed by George Soros. This financier and philanthropist of Hungarian origin is a controversial figure in Russia, but also between the illiberal and “alternative” global scene and the target of various conspiracy theories. This is mainly due to his funding of civic-democratic liberal associations and movements around the

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>65</sup> Putin, Vladimir: “Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir”, *Moskovskiy novosti*, 27 February 2012, at <http://www.mn.ru/politics/78738>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> The vague, unspecified definition of “political activity” in this law is purposeful. The “political activity” thus defined can cover all possible types of legal and human rights activity. The state itself, or specifically the competent Russian authorities decide whether or not a non-governmental organization is involved in “political activity”. This means that such a label can affect as many NGOs in Russia as possible (See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 152).

<sup>68</sup> “Federal'nyy zakon 'O vnesenii izmeneniy v otdel'nyye zakonodatel'nyye akty Rossiyskoy Federatsii v chasti regulirovaniya deyatel'nosti nekommercheskikh organizatsiy, vypolnyayushchikh funktsii inostrannogo agenta' ot 20.07.2012 N 121-FZ”, *Kompaniya Konsul'tant Plyus*, 20 July 2012, at [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_132900/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_132900/).

<sup>69</sup> In addition, the label “foreign agent” must be included in all materials that NGOs plan to publish in the mass media (including publications on the Internet).

<sup>70</sup> “Federal'nyy zakon 'O vnesenii izmeneniy v otdel'nyye zakonodatel'nyye akty Rossiyskoy Federatsii' ot 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ”, *Kompaniya Konsul'tant Plyus*, 23 May 2015, at [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_179979/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_179979/).

<sup>71</sup> The law also explicitly prohibits local organizations from receiving funds from banned “unwanted” sources and prosecutes those that receive funds from these banned sources of funding, presumably to allow the Kremlin to shut down Russian NGOs that have refused and avoided (looking for gaps in the law) to be described as a “foreign agent”. It was a reliable and well-thought-out plan to prevent unwanted foreign (Western) influence: both by attacking sources of funding and by attacking those who receive it (See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 156).

<sup>72</sup> In November 2015 these two organisations were added to the list of “undesirable organisations” because they, according to the Russian prosecution, represent “threat to the constitutional order and the security of the Russian state” (Yegorov, Ivan: “Poprosili iz Rossii: Genprokuratura priznala Fond Sorosa nezhelatel'nym v strane”, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 30 November 2015, at <https://rg.ru/2015/11/30/fond-site-anons.html>). For this reason, these foundations had to stop distributing their promotional materials in Russia, funding secondary Russian NGOs, and had to end all possible forms of cooperation with Russian citizens.



world, which are sharply opposed to “illiberal” statesmen (including Vladimir Putin) and their way of governing the country. According to Shaun Walker, Soros is perceived by pro-Kremlin supporters and politicians as “a kind of puppet master, directing ‘colour revolutions’ in post-Soviet states. However, organisations which had received grants from Soros said this characterisation was inaccurate.”<sup>73</sup>

It is clear that the above Russian legislative regulations and laws are “explicitly aimed at eradicating Western influence and presence in the country, as well as laying a firm foundation for an illiberal society with limited human rights, weak civil society, and no independent public institutions.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, these illiberal political values are not confined to Russia only, but appear to extend beyond, into Europe as well. “It seems that xenophobic, homophobic, and generally anti-Western, illiberal groups in Europe have an ally and rather than being ostracized from the European political and cultural landscapes, they may, and often do, turn to Russia for support.”<sup>75</sup>

#### **4.2. The implementation of Russia’s anti-Western foreign policy**

As mentioned above, according to Joseph S. Nye, soft power is more convincing and effective when the ideological component corresponds with the foreign policy of the state. Referring to Kaczmarek and Keating, it can be stated that “there are two elements within broader Russian foreign policy that map onto their ideological preferences that have augmented the attraction of their conservative values. First, Russia’s criticism of the U.S.-led liberal international order and the related anti-Westernism maps onto Moscow’s promotion of conservative values. Second, Russia’s defence of sovereignty against Western intervention maps onto Russia’s nationalist values and fearlessly standing up against the global superpower.”<sup>76</sup>

This criticism and opposition to Western (American) foreign policy is re-demonstrated through the aforementioned civilizationism, as the Kremlin’s illiberal domestic values and policies are reflected in practicing Russian foreign policy. It can be defined into several particular but interlocking parts. The first is a consistent promotion of a multipolar vision as an effective and just pluralistic global system in international politics by Russia in order to eliminate or delegitimize the unipolar order and balance the influence of the U.S. Multipolarity, represents Russia’s response to the trauma and humiliation of Russia’s descent into the “lower weight category”,<sup>77</sup> which brought about the end of a bipolarly divided world.

However, Russia’s approach to the multipolar narrative has been confrontational from the beginning, i. e. it is an approach, which places Russia at the forefront of a group of states strongly opposed to U.S. hegemony, standing against the “collective universalism of the West”,<sup>78</sup> in contrast to China, which “advocates the choice of an inclusive non-participatory approach to international relations. China will therefore not be drawn into the confrontational notion of multipolarity. The multipolar world is an attractive concept for China, on which the country works by its own modernization and not by foreign policy confrontation.”<sup>79</sup> It follows from the above that the multipolarism thus perceived by Russia is basically only a sophisticated attempt at a dualistic confrontation of the “Eurasianist alliance” led by Russia with the “Atlantic world” under the leadership of the U.S. After 2012, as a result of the already mentioned “war

<sup>73</sup> Walker, Shaun: “Russia bans two Soros foundations from disbursing grants”, *The Guardian*, 30 November 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/30/russia-bans-two-george-soros-foundations-from-giving-grants>.

<sup>74</sup> See Kreko and Györi ed., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> See Kaczmarek and Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> See Kurfürst, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.



of values” and the building of a new ideology, using civilizationalist aspects that presuppose an opposition to the West, the theory of multipolarity has become increasingly confrontational.<sup>80</sup>

The second key part in the conduct of Russian foreign policy is the promotion of antipathy or hostility towards NATO, but also strict anti-Americanism. This thesis stems from an alleged betrayal committed by the West on weakened Russia (at that time the USSR) at the end of bipolarity. It was supposed to be an alleged promise by former U.S. president George W. Bush Sr. to the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev during talks at the Malta summit in December 1989. Here, Bush Sr. was to promise that NATO will not expand beyond the borders of then-West Germany. However, this “agreement” was never confirmed.<sup>81</sup> As Solik puts it, “this feeling or myth of ‘betrayal’ by the West, which ignored its interests and allowed NATO to expand into Central and Eastern Europe, is used by Russia as a propagandist to excuse Russian foreign policy revisionism”<sup>82</sup> and Russian (foreign) policy in general.

In the long run, Russia purposefully creates an image of NATO as an enemy that aggressively threatens Russia which only has to defend itself. This aversion of Russia to NATO is also incorporated into Russian conceptual documents<sup>83</sup>. In addition, Russia presents NATO not only as a symbol of a threat to Russia, but also as a “symbol of Western unilateral interference.”<sup>84</sup> in the world. However, as Kurfürst points out, Russia’s allegations (including Russia’s reference to the “betrayal” of the West) are unfounded and not based on factual arguments.<sup>85</sup> The negative image of NATO presented by Russia is subsequently accepted by a

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<sup>80</sup> For example, during a meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in October 2014 in Sochi, Russia, Vladimir Putin pointed out the danger of “unipolar dominance”, stressing that “the period of unipolar domination has convincingly demonstrated that having only one power centre does not make global processes more manageable. On the contrary, this kind of unstable construction has shown its inability to fight the real threats such as regional conflicts, terrorism, drug trafficking, religious fanaticism, chauvinism and neo-Nazism. At the same time, it has opened the road wide for inflated national pride, manipulating public opinion and letting the strong bully and suppress the weak. Essentially, the unipolar world is simply a means of justifying dictatorship over people and countries” (Putin, Vladimir: “Zasedaniye Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valday»”, *Prezident Rossii*, 24 October 2014, at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>).

<sup>81</sup> Jack Matlock, a former U.S. ambassador to the USSR from 1987 to 1991, also commented on this topic. In the spring of 2014, he clarified for the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya pravda* that all discussions in December 1989 (Maltese Bush Sr. and Gorbachev Summit) and in 1990 on NATO enlargement took place exclusively in the context of the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. This version was later confirmed by Gorbachev himself. The Soviet politician stressed that the issue of NATO enlargement was not discussed at all, but the overriding task was to agree that no non-German troops would be deployed in the German Democratic Republic, even if it did fall under NATO jurisdiction (Dolejší, Karel: “Gorbačov na adresu ‘nerozšírování NATO na východ’”, *Britské listy*, 20 October 2014, at <https://blisty.cz/art/75163-gorbacov-na-adresu-nerozsirovani-nato-na-vychod.html>).

<sup>82</sup> See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>83</sup> In the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014, for example, the first five risks mentioned explicitly or implicitly relate to NATO. NATO thus maintains its position as the main geopolitical adversary from Russia’s point of view. The first three risks are considered to be: “a) capacity power potential NATO and giving it global functions carried out in violation of international law, the approach of military infrastructure countries – members of NATO to the borders of the Russian Federation, including through further expansion of the block; b) to destabilize the situation in individual countries and regions and undermining global and regional stability; c) deployment (build-up) of military contingents foreign states (groups of states) in the territories States bordering on the Russian Federation and its allies, as well as in adjacent waters, including political and military pressure on the Russian Federation.” (“Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii”, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 30 December 2014, at <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>).

<sup>84</sup> Laruelle, Marlene: “Russia’s Bedfellowing Policy and the European Far Right”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, 6 May 2015, at [https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Russian\\_Analytical\\_Digest\\_167.pdf](https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Russian_Analytical_Digest_167.pdf), p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> See Kurfürst, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-257.



wide range of radical nationalist, left-wing and other anti-liberal actors in the world, who zealously consider NATO a “terrorist organization”.

It should also be noted that the thesis of anti-Americanism consistently promoted by Russia in its foreign policy is equally very effective. “Within Europe, Russian anti-American sentiments appeal to radical forces on both ends of the European political spectrum. They share with Russia a vision of Europe that would distance itself from the U.S., drop its supranational agenda, and limit the export of European norms and values to the rest of the world.”<sup>86</sup> Anti-systemic, populist scene admires Russia for what it perceives as its successful challenging of the international status quo, characterized by the domination of the West, and its questioning of the global role of the U.S.

This admiration stems from the fact, that Russia seeks to denounce this form of real-politik, and to establish alternatives to American global dominance. These alternatives are made up of several elements, including respect for state sovereignty in a Westphalian sense or a refusal to support any U.S. policy of overthrowing current regimes in the name of democratic claims.<sup>87</sup> This discourse emphasizes Russia’s role “a leader of non-liberal politics and a defender of state sovereignty worldwide. Despite the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Kremlin continues its criticism of the U.S. for transgressing the sovereignty of other states.”<sup>88</sup> Needless to say, the U. S. represent the enemy number one for the radical leftist and nationalist scene (as a symbol of capitalism, economic neoliberalism, globalization, or Western imperialism). We can thus use a well-known proverb, which says: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”<sup>89</sup>

Finally, the third illiberal feature that is reflected in Russian foreign policy is the thesis of the protection of Christians in the world and the Russian “pro-Christian global agenda” itself. In this agenda, the Kremlin is strongly assisted by the influential ROC, led by Patriarch Kirill. Here it is necessary to emphasize that the narrative of the Kremlin and Putin himself, as the “saviour of Christianity,” was cleverly presented by the ROC itself after Russia began its intervention in Syria (September 2015). This thesis, which proclaimed that Russian military airstrikes in Syria were a legitimate and “virtuous” act aimed solely at protecting Syrian Christian minorities, was subsequently taken over by many ultra-conservative pastors and politicians in the U.S. and Europe.<sup>90</sup>

To cut a long story short, Russia’s foreign policy is consistently anti-American, aimed at plurality, sovereignty and the protection of Christian values around the world, and is therefore supported by politicians and public opinion around the world.

### **5. Slovakia and Central Europe: Reasons for today’s manoeuvring with pro-Russian and illiberal trends**

One of the most important geographical territories in Europe, in which a significant influence of the Russian soft power is visible, is the region of Central Europe and especially Slovakia. This fact has been demonstrated by several relevant surveys in this region. For example, a 2016 study prepared by the Slovak security NGO Globsec, which maps the effects of the Kremlin’s sophisticated campaign in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, provides interesting data. Anti-Americanism is a significant factor in distrust towards NATO. To illustrate: 59% of Slovaks and 51% of Czechs find the U.S.’s role in Europe and the world negative, and the idea that the U.S. uses NATO to control small countries is believed by 60% and 58% respectively.

<sup>86</sup> See Kaczmaraska and Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> See Laruelle, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> See Kaczmaraska and Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>89</sup> See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.



To the contrary, 46% of the Hungarians see the U.S. engagement in the world and European affairs in a positive light, and 39% negatively. Also, many fewer Hungarians (39%) than their Czech and Slovak counterparts believe that the U. S. uses NATO to control other countries and impose their will on them. However, there is a non-negligible positive trend within younger sociological groups. While, for instance, Slovak supporters of Western geopolitical embeddedness in the 65+ age group do not exceed 11%, support among their youngest fellows (18-24 years) is as strong as 40%. Similarly, while only 25% of people over 65 support NATO, almost 37% of the youngsters think the membership in the alliance is a good thing. However, there is a significant vulnerability that might reverse this trend, if not addressed properly: 29% of young Slovaks between 19 and 24 have more confidence in “alternative” media (that of conspiracy theories and anti-West propaganda) and the trend in support for these outlets is constantly growing. Among the whole population, the support rating is 17% (7% in the 65+ group).<sup>91</sup>

It is a rather pessimistic statement after last year’s 30th anniversary of “the Velvet revolution” against the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1989. It was then, at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, that there was a massive wave of liberal enthusiasm, new hopes and expectations around the world, which were in principle also reflected in Nye’s liberal concept of soft power. In the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama’s famous article entitled “The End of History?”<sup>92</sup> was published. The liberal euphoria from the “end of history”, of course, spread to the region of Central Europe. At the same time, the visions of the leading Czech-French writer Milan Kundera about the return of “kidnapped” Central Europe back to (Western) Europe began to be fulfilled.<sup>93</sup> The unequivocal acceptance of proliberal values by the newly created states in Central Europe was also expressed in the first Visegrad Declaration of 15 February 1991, which spoke of the interest of the participating states in: “full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom; elimination of all existing social, economic and spiritual aspects of the totalitarian system; construction of a parliamentary democracy, a modern State of Law, respect for human rights and freedoms; creation of a modern free market economy.”<sup>94</sup>

Specifically, in Slovakia, after a short period of “liberal enthusiasm”, there was a sudden sobering up after the elections in 1992 and the following first independent ones in the era of Slovakia in 1994, in which The People’s Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia led by controversial politician and Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar with authoritative tendencies won.

<sup>91</sup> Šuplata, Milan and Nič, Milan (2016): *Russia’s Information War In Central Europe: New Trends and Counter-Measures*, Bratislava, Globsec Policy Institute, p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> Fukuyama is typical representative of neoliberal internationalism, advocating the democratic peace thesis, which holds that liberal states do not go to war with other liberal states. Neoliberal internationalism presupposes that liberal states tend to be wealthy and therefore have less to gain from engaging in conflicts than do poorer, nonliberal states. Thus, for neoliberal internationalism, peace is logical, since liberal states are “friendly” “with other liberal states because they share the same system. (Waisová, Šárka (2002): *Úvod do studia mezinárodních vztahů, Dobrá voda u Pelhřimova, Aleš Čeněk Publishing*, pp. 53-54). In 1992, Fukuyama developed his theory into a book with a similar title *The End of History and the Last Man*, even without a question mark at the end. In the article and then in the book, the author basically predicts that history is coming to its end, as it was the liberal idea, not the liberal practice that had won this war (*Ibid.*, p. 55).

<sup>93</sup> In his famous essay entitled *The Kidnapped West, The Tragedy of Central Europe* in 1983, Kundera described the then Central Europe as a space that belongs geographically to the center of the continent, but politically, and against its own will, to the East and culturally to the West. According to Kundera, after 1945, a piece of the West in the form of Central Europe was “kidnapped” by the Byzantine East with roots in Orthodox Christianity, whose culture and traditions are different because Russia, at its center, had never undergone the spiritual changes that defined the West, especially the Western rationalism (Kundera, Milan: “Únos Západu”, in Havelka, Miloš; Cabada Ladislav (ed.) (2000): *Západní, východní a střední Evropa jako kulturní a politické pojmy*, Plzeň, Západočeská univerzita., p. 102).

<sup>94</sup> *Visegrad Declaration*, Visegrad group, 15 February 1991, at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>.



The foreign policy of the newly formed Slovakia thus balanced between East and West in 1993-1998, when the Slovakian Prime Minister accepted “the Russian perception of Europe’s security architecture on several issues, which on the other hand compensated for the deterioration of Slovakia’s relations with the U.S. and the EU due to undemocratic tendencies in domestic policy.”<sup>95</sup>

Although Slovakia turned away from this political situation due to political changes in the second half of the 1990s (the openly pro-European government of Mikuláš Dzurinda in 1998-2006, which contributed to Slovakia’s accession to the EU and NATO in 2004) course, in the public debate, a tendency towards the illiberal notion of democracy has recently begun to re-appear, especially in the conservative and traditionalist parts of society. It can be heard from the ranks of politicians, some academics, but also, and above all, from hierarchical representatives of the Christian churches. At the same time, it is part of a wider, Central Europe-transcendent nationalist, “right-wing populist anti-wave.”<sup>96</sup>

Opinions or reasons why distinct illiberal and populist values have become established in Central European countries and thus also in Slovakia in recent years vary. One of the most rational justifications for this urgent topic was provided by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes. They believe that the deviation of the states of Central Europe from the values of liberal democracy is not related to ideology or economics, “but instead to the pent-up animosity engendered by the centrality of mimesis in the reform processes launched in the East after 1989. The region’s illiberal turn cannot be grasped apart from the political expectation of ‘normality’ created by the 1989 revolution and the politics of imitation that it legitimized.”<sup>97</sup> Both authors consistently argue, that after the Berlin Wall fell, Europe was no longer divided between communists and democrats. It was instead divided between imitators and the imitated. While the mimics looked up to their models, the models looked down on their mimics. It is not entirely mysterious, therefore, why the “imitation of the West” voluntarily chosen by East Europeans three decades ago eventually resulted in a political backlash.<sup>98</sup>

According to Krastev and Holmes, for two decades after 1989, the political philosophy of postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe could be summarized in a single imperative: “Imitate the West!” The process of imitation can be understood as the promotion of democratization, liberalization, integration, Europeanization, or applying Western political and economic recipes. The goal pursued by postcommunist reformers was simple. They wished their countries to become “normal,” which meant like the West. Imitation was widely understood to be the shortest pathway to freedom and prosperity. Unfortunately, this process of imitation has also brought moral and psychological disadvantages to post-communist states. The imitator’s life inescapably produces feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, lost identity, and involuntary insincerity. Indeed, the futile struggle to create a truly credible copy of an idealized model involves a never-ending torment of self-criticism if not self-contempt.<sup>99</sup>

Both authors arrive at an interesting conclusion. What makes imitation so irksome is not only the implicit assumption that the mimic is somehow morally and humanly inferior to the model. It also entails the assumption that Central and Eastern Europe’s copycat nations accept

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<sup>95</sup> Marušiak, Juraj: “Ruský faktor v strednej Európe”, in Prečan Vilém; Holec Roman (ed.) (2016): *Ve službách česko-slovenského porozumění/porozumenia: Pocta Vojtovi Čelkovi*, Prague, The Czechoslovak Documentation Centre in Prague, p. 263.

<sup>96</sup> Sekerák, Marián: “Neliberálny populizmus na Slovensku: prípad tzv. rodovej ideológie”, *Acta Politologica*, vol. 12, n° 1 (January 2020), p. 65.

<sup>97</sup> Krastev, Ivan and Holmes, Stephen: “Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, n° 3 (July 2018), p. 118.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



the West's right to evaluate their success or failure at living up to Western standards. In this sense, imitation comes to feel like a loss of sovereignty. Thus, the rise of authoritarian chauvinism and xenophobia in Central and Eastern Europe has its roots not in political theory, but in political psychology. It reflects a deep-seated disgust at the post-1989 "imitation imperative," with all its demeaning and humiliating implications.<sup>100</sup>

It can thus be said that that the government officials' and partly Central European public's inclination to illiberal populist trends lies "in the humiliations associated with the uphill struggle to become, at best, an inferior copy of a superior model. These experiences have combined to produce a nativist reaction in the region, a reassertion of 'authentic' national traditions allegedly suffocated by second-hand and ill-fitting Western forms. The post-national liberalism associated especially with EU enlargement has allowed aspiring populists to claim exclusive ownership of national traditions and national identity. This was the mainspring of the anti-liberal revolt in the region. But a subsidiary factor was also involved, namely, the unargued assumption that, after 1989, there were no alternatives to liberal political and economic models. This presumption spawned a contrarian desire to prove that there were, indeed, such alternatives."<sup>101</sup>

In principle, therefore, it is possible to speak of a certain "counter-revolution" of Central European states towards Western liberalism, a strict definition of "compulsory imitation" and the resulting "illiberal shift", which aims to forget about the failed "imitation period". Unfortunately, it turns out that this rejection of liberal values, or the "liberal counter-revolution" of Central European states is reinforced and supported by a number of fundamental factors, in particular shifts in global politics.

Authoritarian China's rise as an economic powerhouse has dissolved what had once been seen as the intrinsic link between liberal democracy and material prosperity. While in 1989 liberalism was associated with appealing ideals of individual freedom, legal fairness, and governmental transparency, by 2010 it had been tainted by two decades of association with really existing and inevitably faulty postcommunist governments. The disastrous consequences of the Iraq War, launched in 2003, discredited the idea of democracy promotion. The economic crisis of 2008 bred a deep distrust of business elites and of the "casino capitalism" that almost destroyed the world financial order. Central and East Europeans turned against liberalism not so much because it was failing at home as because in their view it was failing in the West.<sup>102</sup>

The massive wave of migration in 2015-2016 that hit Europe and the united attitude of the V4 states to this serious crisis (especially the strict rejection of EU quotas on the mandatory redistribution of refugees to EU Member States) only confirmed this rejection of liberal Western values. The leaders of the V4 have sharply defined themselves against Western European humanism and solidarity. In other words, "they issued their declaration of independence not only from Brussels but also, more dramatically, from Western liberalism and its religion of openness to the world"<sup>103,104</sup> The rise of national-populist anti-liberals can thus be a reaction to the "global elitism", which threatens national consciousness and the very national culture of the V4 states. Orbán's lieutenant Mária Schmidt expressed this by stating

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>101</sup> Krastev, Ivan and Holmes, Stephen: "Populismes à l'Est: une angoisse démographique", *Le Débat*, vol. 204, n° 2 (April 2019), p. 161.

<sup>102</sup> See Krastev, Holmes, *Explaining...*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>103</sup> See Krastev, Holmes, *Populismes...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 162.

<sup>104</sup> Krastev and Holmes writes that "Central Europe's fear-mongering populists interpreted the refugee crisis as conclusive evidence that liberalism has weakened the capacity of nations to defend themselves in a hostile world" (*Ibid.*, p. 163).



“we are Hungarians, and we want to preserve our culture.”<sup>105</sup> However, this shift in Central Europe is now reaching dangerous parameters. The political “anti-liberal demagogues who denounce copycat Westernization as a betrayal of the nation.”<sup>106</sup> It can therefore be stated that, three core issues lie at the root of today’s rising populism and anti-western moods in Central Europe: 1. the feeling of inferiority and misunderstanding on the part of Western leaders; 2. significant events in the world economy and politics, which negatively affected and seriously disrupted the reputation of liberalism in the West; 3. the ongoing crisis of the EU. As a result, this organization is unable to take effective action, especially on the issue of migration, today’s key challenge to the Western world. Especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis, public opinion turned decidedly against the EU, signalling that “euro-scepticism” “was no longer the niche purview of the ‘crazies’ on the political fringe.”<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, it is Russia, that is prosperous from the crisis in the EU today. “The populist surge is partly a rational response to the apparent political failures of the established parties.”<sup>108,109</sup>

However, in the context of the inclination towards illiberal socio-conservative values, it is necessary not to forget two other key factors in the case of Slovakia. It is these factors, which help the penetration of illiberal Russian soft power in Slovakia significantly. First, it is a relatively close ideological and political legacy with Russia. A typical example is ideological legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century national intellectual elite (A relatively coherent idea about the relationship between Slovakia and Russia was presented by Ľudovít Štúr, or Svetozár Hurban Vajanský<sup>110</sup>) and political and ideological legacy of the leftist intellectual circles from the interwar period and of the Slovak Communists (1948–1989), who promoted a pro-Russian/Soviet course and continue building on the nostalgia for the “good old times before 1989.”<sup>111</sup> It is paradoxical, but the nostalgia for the “period before 1989” is now felt by many Slovaks (especially the inhabitants of older middle and older adult age),<sup>112</sup> despite the fact that the already mentioned Kundera wrote in exile, that “After the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Russians did everything to destroy Czech culture. This destruction had three aims: first, it destroyed the opposition center; second, it undermined the identity of the nation so that it could

<sup>105</sup> Oltermann, Philip: “Can Europe’s new xenophobes reshape the continent?”, *The Guardian*, 3 February 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/03/europe-xenophobes-continent-poland-hungary-austria-nationalism-migrants>.

<sup>106</sup> See Krastev, Holmes, *Populismes...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 162.

<sup>107</sup> Antunez, Carlos Juan: “The Role of Religion and Values in Russian Policies: The Case of Hybrid Warfare”, 2 November 2017, at <https://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=en/content/role-religion-and-values-russian-policies-case-hybrid-warfare>.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> The upsurge of populism in Europe has provided Russia with an ample supply of sympathetic political parties across the continent. “These parties – mostly from the far right but also from the far left – are pursuing policies and taking positions that advance Russia’s agenda in Europe. They tend to be anti-establishment parties – some on the extreme fringes of the political spectrum – that challenge the mainstream liberal order in Europe. Their agenda, depending on specific in-country conditions, may be anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, anti-gay, anti-immigrant” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>110</sup> Štúr was the codifier of the modern Slovak language. He wrote his important philosophical book, *Das Slaventhum und die Welt der Zukunft* (“Slavdom and the world of the future”), written in German, and published in Russian in 1867 and 1909 in Moscow (subsequently published in German in 1931, and in Slovak in 1993). Among other things, he recapitulated the events that brought the Slovaks to the desperate situation of that time, and suggested cooperation with Russia as a solution, thus moving away from Slovak nationalism toward pan-Slavism. At the end of the 19th century, Štúr’s ideas were further developed by another prominent Slovak intellectual leader, Svetozár Hurban Vajanský, the editor of cultural and literary magazine *Slovenské pohľady* [Slovak Insights] who supported the idea of Slovaks’ connection to the “giant Russian oak” (See, Krekó, Lóránt (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 42).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>112</sup> Solik, Martin: “Je dobrým znakom, že prezidentkou je žena, polarizácia sa však môže prehlbovať”, *My – Kysucké Noviny*, vol. 20, n°. 13 (April 2019), p. 4.



be more easily absorbed by Russian civilization; third, it forcefully ended the modern period, a period in which culture has so far meant the realization of the highest values.”<sup>113</sup>

Secondly, there is a high level of religiosity for Slovakia, which has historical roots. This factor has played a significant role in promoting Russian influence. It can be stated that religiosity is a certain supporting element in the spread of soft power. As Majo and Šprocha write “the importance of religion, its influence on the processes that take place in it are inalienable in the history of Slovakia. Only the intensity of influences changes, or its strength is underestimated or often overestimated in the scientific discussion, which is often the case today. The importance of religion was specific even in the time before the intensive penetration of secularization.”<sup>114</sup> It should be noted here that religious (Christian) feelings have survived and remained in the minds of Slovaks even after 40 years of Soviet violent atheistic attempts to degrade it in Slovak society.

The level of religiosity has remained high in Slovakia to this day. Based on the last census in Slovakia, approximately 75% of the population professes Christianity (with the highest percentage of 62% Roman Catholic, followed by Evangelicals 5.9% and Greek Catholics 3.8%).<sup>115</sup> In addition, we must not forget another fact, which concerns the high degree of religiosity. Many regions in Slovakia in the north (a typical example is the Kysuce Region) and in the east of Slovakia had been predominantly rural regions, which were intensely industrialized as late as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the typical urban liberal tradition and urban culture have never flourished here.<sup>116,117</sup>

## **6. Russia as a global leader of illiberal traditionalist-conservative values – a model worth following for Slovakia?**

The above-mentioned *Globsec* survey from 2016 indicates that the number of people in Slovakia who do not identify with the principles of liberal democracy and positively appreciate Russia’s role in international politics while degrading the importance and significance of Slovakia is growing. It is even possible to state, that among the V4 countries, “Slovakia has the largest pro-Russian population. This can be attributed to the country’s close cultural, historic and linguistic ties to Russia, a shared Pan-Slavic ideology and the current presence of Russia-related groups and prominent figures in the Slovak civic and educational system, including a significant pro-Russian far-right subculture.”<sup>118</sup>

<sup>113</sup> See Kundera, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>114</sup> Šprocha, Branislav and Majo, Juraj (2016): *Storočie populačného vývoja Slovenska II.: populačné štruktúry*, Bratislava, INFOSTAT – Výskumné demografické centrum, p. 65.

<sup>115</sup> Gazda, Imrich: “Sčítanie obyvateľstva 2011: Katolíkov a evanjelikov ubudlo”, *Konzervatívny denník Postoj*, 1 March 2012, at <https://svetkrestanstva.postoj.sk/2530/scitanie-obyvateľstva-2011-katolikov-a-evanjelikov-ubudlo>.

<sup>116</sup> See Solik, Je dobrým..., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>117</sup> This statement has been confirmed by a recent survey carried out by the Focus agency for the Slovakian television channel *Markíza*, conducted from 15 to 22 January 2020 on a sample of 1013 respondents in various parts of Slovakia. People were asked: “Some conservative politicians warn against the threats of liberalism, such as the introduction of registered same-sex partnerships or support for the Istanbul Convention, which they say violates traditional societal values. Liberal politicians, on the other hand, say that we must be tolerant of others and respect their rights, and that liberal values are no threat to the morals of society. What is your opinion on this matter?” According to the results of the survey, the most conservatives are in Slovak cities Prešov (69.8%) and Žilina regions (65.2%) in the east and north of Slovakia. Proponents of liberal values believing that people should be tolerant of others and respect their rights are mostly found in Trnava (43.4%), Košice (42.2%) and Bratislava regions (38.3%). (Hajčáková, Daniela: “Prieskum: Ku konzervatívnym hodnotám sa hlási šesť z desiatich Slovákov”, *SME*, 16 February 2020, at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22327014/prieskum-ku-konzervativnym-hodnotam-sa-hlasi-sest-z-desiatich-slovakov.html>).

<sup>118</sup> Györi, Lóránt (ed.) (2019): *Larger than life – Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia?* Budapest: Political Capital Institute, p. 13.



The latest Globsec Trends 2019 report also confirmed these assumptions.<sup>119</sup> Among the seventh countries of the Central and Eastern Europe, 41% of Slovaks think that the US is a threat to their country (by far the most in the whole region). On the other side, 26 % of Slovaks think that Russia presents a danger (significant threat) to their country. This result only reflects deeply rooted anti-Americanism as a legacy of communist soviet regime in Slovakia. Non-liberal trends in Slovakia are also demonstrated by the fact, that 60 % of Slovaks think that China's expansive policy and its massive influence which is gradually growing globally does not represent a danger (significant threat) to their country. In addition, only 59 % of Slovaks think that the work of NGOs is important for the functioning of a democratic society (second out of seven states after Bulgaria).<sup>120</sup>

In the case of support to Western European institutions (EU, NATO) of which Slovakia is a member, the situation is also not ideal. Only 56 % of Slovaks (in 2017 it was only 43 % of Slovaks) support Slovakia's membership in NATO. Slovakia thus ranked last among the seven Central and Eastern European countries (along with Bulgaria – 56% as well). In practice, this means that up to 44% of Slovaks surveyed question NATO as a guarantor of security and Slovakia's pro-Western security policy. 65% of Slovaks (second place after Bulgaria – 77%) also believe that “EU dictates to us what to do without my country having power to influence it.”<sup>121</sup>

In the context of social-conservative values as one of the most important elements of Russian illiberal soft power, it should be noted that cross-border admiration and respect for Putin's Russia as a country where “‘traditional’, ‘family’ and ‘Christian values’ have triumphed”,<sup>122</sup> and which fights against the decadent and amoral West, has fully developed from political leaders and public opinion following the above-mentioned Russian declaration of the „war of values” of the West in 2012. In this period controversial laws were adopted in Russia (against NGOs in July 2012 and against homosexuals or the LGBT community in June 2013). These laws were simultaneously widely discussed not only in Russian society but also in the world). A wave of support and recognition was subsequently expressed towards the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin himself by influential political and civic activists, especially from the ranks of radical nationalist and ultra-conservative Christian groups around the world, especially in Eastern European countries, but also in Hungary, France, Italy, or even the U. S.<sup>123</sup> They consider Russia and its president “as a symbol of strength, racial purity and traditional Christian values in a world under threat from Islam, immigrants and rootless cosmopolitan elites.”<sup>124</sup> During this period, it is possible to speak at the same time about the increasingly visible polarization of global society into a “liberal west” and an “illiberal east” (led by Russia),

<sup>119</sup> This report is a unique insight into perceptions of more than 7,000 citizens from Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia in the context of various important anniversaries in Central and Eastern Europe (30 years of democracy, 70 years of NATO, 15 years since joining the EU)

<sup>120</sup> Milo, Daniel; Klingová Katarína (ed.) (2019): *Globsec Trends 2019: Central & Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain*, Bratislava, Globsec Policy Institute, p. 22.

<sup>121</sup> See Milo and Klingová ed., *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>122</sup> Shekhovtsov, Anton: “The Kremlin's marriage of convenience with the European far right” openDemocracy, 28 April 2014, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kremlins-marriage-of-convenience-with-european-far-right/>.

<sup>123</sup> Russia's anti-gay laws, in particular, were a hit among many European ultranationalists, especially in France and in Italy, where the far-right *Fronte Nazionale* expressed its support for Putin's “courageous position against the powerful gay lobby” (See Shekhovtsov, *op. cit.*) (as well as anti-EU and pro-Assad stances) through dozens of posters in Rome called “I agree with Putin!” (*Ibid.*) For Gábor Vona (a former leader the Hungarian far right political party *Jobbik*), Russia is “a better Europe” because it “preserves its traditions and does not follow the culture of money and the masses”. (*Ibid.*) French far-right party *Rassemblement National* leader *Marine Le Pen* similarly declared in 2014 that “Vladimir Putin and her defend common values, which are the values of the European civilisation, in particular its Christian heritage” (See Kaczmarek and Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 9).

<sup>124</sup> See Antunez, *op. cit.*



which was initiated by Russia. This polarization of society today is proceeding relentlessly and fundamentally divides society in the world as it was in the time of the Cold War.

In Slovakia, the trend of gradually defining oneself against liberalism and, conversely, the promotion of traditionalist and Christian values began to develop and penetrate into the wider public discourse in 2013 during the presidential campaign in Slovakia. In it, one of the candidates, a long-time and experienced leader of the *Direction – Social Democracy party* (originally founded as the left-wing Social Democratic party) Róbert Fico (the then acting Slovakian prime minister) decided to take steps and messages he had never used before. For example, in a stylized video interview with the head of his election team (then Minister of Culture of Slovakia) Marek Maďarič, he said that he grew up in a family from which a number of (Catholic) priests and members of religious orders emerged, and that he himself underwent baptism as a child, by Holy Communion and Confirmation. He claimed this despite the fact that in 1986 he joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia as a 21-year-old university student. In his application to this party, he stated that he “takes a strictly atheistic position.”<sup>125</sup>

It is possible to assume that being an experienced politician Fico was aware of the rise of illiberal Christian-traditionalist values spreading from Russia and the advancing value polarization of global society, which also affected Slovakia. In this way, he tried to address conservative-minded and hesitant voters in Slovakia, who, for example, in September 2013 organized probably the most massive civic event since November 1989, the so-called “March for Life”, which took place in Košice, the second-largest city in Slovakia.<sup>126</sup> Even in this period, it is possible to observe the inclination of the dominant Slovak political party *Direction – Social Democracy* to conservatism and traditionalism. This trend is constantly strengthening over time and continues to last in principle.

The main force responsible for spreading social-conservative, anti-liberal values in Slovakia is just the hierarchy of the influential Roman Catholic Church. Unfortunately, several of its members publicly support Marián Kotleba and his party: *Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia*. It is an originally marginal, anti-systemic, populist and extremely nationalist political party, which is gaining strength in Slovak society in a dangerous way.<sup>127</sup> Even in the 2019 European Parliament elections, the party won two seats. The party “pursues its pro-Russian, anti-establishment politics opposing the Euro-Atlantic community along several other ‘civic’ actors and paramilitary organisations supported by strong pro-Russian online ‘alternative media’.”<sup>128</sup> Although Kotleba refers to Christian values, he also skillfully combines various populist radical-left (communist) elements: rejection of capitalism, liberalism and privatization;<sup>129</sup> ambition to expropriate strategic enterprises for cheaper electricity, heat and

<sup>125</sup> Benedikovičová, Mária: “Fico v prihláške do KSČ: Som prísny ateista”, *SME*, 17 January 2014, at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/7070789/fico-v-prihlaske-do-ksc-som-prisny-ateista.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Rybář, Marek; Spáč, Peter and Voda, Petr (2014): *Prezidentské voľby na Slovensku v roku 2014*, Brno, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, pp. 52-53.

<sup>127</sup> Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia won only 1.58% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in 2012 (“Výsledky parlamentných volieb 2012“, *Sme*, at <https://volby.sme.sk/parlamentne-volby/2012/vysledky>). The first significant success of this party was the victory of Marián Kotleba in the 2nd round of elections to higher territorial units in Slovakia in 2013. He was then elected governor of Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region with 71,397 (55.53%) valid votes. Marián Kotleba’s party benefited significantly from anti-system and populist European sentiments, and in the 2016 parliamentary elections it was elected into the NC SR (Slovakian parliament) for the first time, winning up to 8.04% of the votes (See Solik, *Strategický... op. cit.*, pp. 244-245). In the recent parliamentary elections in February 2020, the party won 7.97% of the votes (“Výsledky parlamentných volieb 2020“, *op. cit.*).

<sup>128</sup> Mesežnikov Grigorij and Bránik Radovan: “Slovensko”, in Krekó Péter; Györi Lóránt (ed.) (2017): *Z Ruska s Nenávistou*, Budapest, Political Capital Institute, p. 23.

<sup>129</sup> Budajová, Michaela: “Programatika a ideológia Ľudovej strany Naše Slovensko a Slovenskej pospolitosti – národnej strany”, *Politologická revue*, vol. 24, n°. 1 (July 2018), p. 103.



water; the use of nostalgia for the communist regime; emphasis on extreme state /etatist/ interventions in order to ensure security ... The members of this party also include persons “accused of racially-motivated criminal offences and anti-Semitic hate speech.”<sup>130</sup>

In the context of the very essence of this party, it may come as a surprise that despite the party’s proud commitment to the war of authoritarian and anti-Semitic Slovak Republic, which was a satellite of Nazi Germany and its president Jozef Tiso cooperated with Adolf Hitler, the party expresses extremely pro-Russian attitudes<sup>131</sup> in foreign policy and openly supports radical anti-American, anti-NATO and anti-Western policies in general, which – as mentioned above – are also fundamental component of Russia’s foreign policy. For example, party vice-president Milan Uhrík declared in December 2018 that “the West, led by the U.S., is trying to bring Russia to its knees at all costs with its aggressive and provocative policy and thus move closer to world domination.”<sup>132</sup> *Kotlebists* have been talking for a long time about the need for Slovakia to withdraw from NATO (the party also had this request in the pre-election main program within the 2020 parliamentary elections), and this party describes this organization as “criminal organisation”.<sup>133</sup> According to the party, NATO is only a “political tool of the U.S.”<sup>134</sup>

However, according to several experts, this is not an unusual phenomenon, but a pragmatic one. It signals a fight for the voter, or more precisely a struggle for the radical (left and national) and anti-system voter that the *Kotlebists* want to win to their side. Slovak extremist expert Tomáš Nociar only confirms this view: “This party seeks to address a wider range of anti-system and authoritarian voters, including those who show sympathy for the ideologies of Bolshevism, Stalinism or the USSR.”<sup>135</sup> This political party can thus be defined as an extremist-populist party, which combines hybrid elements not only of radical nationalism but also of the radical left, i. e. aspects of the communist ideology. After all, almost all of today’s radical-populist European political parties combine sophisticatedly elements of nationalism and communism, in order to define themselves against the values of liberal democracy and capitalism. Their common denominator is also admiration, support for Russia and, in many cases, cooperation with the Russian Kremlin.

Unfortunately, there are cases in Slovakia where the extremist *Kotlebists* – *People’s Party Our Slovakia*, as well as other social and conservative politicians who support

<sup>130</sup> See Mesežnikov and Bránik, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>131</sup> Party leader Marián Kotleba demonstrated these attitudes for the first time as governor of Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region. In January 2014, Kotleba sent an official letter to pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in response to the ongoing “Euromaidan”. In this letter, Kotleba openly asked Yanukovich to “save Ukraine while he has the strength and resources” and “not to give in to the groups that seek to break Ukraine’s territorial integrity and jeopardize its sovereignty and independence by street riots and attacks on government institutions and its officials” (See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 245). In the letter, he called the protesters against Yanukovich “terrorists”, he emphasized the threat of approaching the “terrorist” NATO organization, the danger of Ukraine’s accession to the EU, highlighting the personality of Slobodan Milošević, whom he called “a national Serbian hero” (*Ibid.*, p. 245). In May 2016, he had the Russian national flag hoisted at the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region in honor of the visit of the Russian pro-Kremlin motorcycle gang Night Wolves. With this gesture, the leadership was to “honor the historical friendship between Slovaks and Russians and also express support for further improving relations between these nations” (*Ibid.*, p. 245). In the May issue of the party newspaper “Our Slovakia” from 2017, the leaders of the party identified NATO as a creator of a potential war conflict with Russia (See Budajová, *op. cit.*, p. 104).

<sup>132</sup> Uhrík, Milan: “Vyzývame Pellegriniho, aby zastavil protiruské besnenie a nehlasoval za predloženie sankcií”, *ĽS Naše Slovensko*, 11 December 2018, at <http://www.naseslovensko.net/nase-nazory/zahranicna-politika/vyzyvame-pellegriniho-aby-zastavil-protiruske-besnenie-a-nehlasoval-za-predlzenie-sankcii/>.

<sup>133</sup> “Predvolebný program ĽS Naše Slovensko 2020“, *ĽS Naše Slovensko*, 7 February 2020 at <http://www.naseslovensko.net/nase-nazory/predvolebny-program-ls-nase-slovensko-2020/>.

<sup>134</sup> See Budajová, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>135</sup> See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.



Christianity and at the same time support Russia, are supported by Roman Catholic priests.<sup>136</sup> However, through these activities, they enter the political process in a fundamental way. One of the most discussed Roman Catholic priests in Slovakia today is undoubtedly the controversial Marián Kuffa. Although he enjoyed popularity until 2010 and relatively long afterwards, thanks to his charitable activities, the Slovak nation split up after he began to express itself publicly on value-sensitive topics. He is known for his radical opposition to liberalism, the ideology of gender, but also for the controversial Istanbul Convention.<sup>137</sup> It is this document of the Council of Europe (i. e. not the EU and “Brussels” as the “alternative” websites often misinform), which causes a fundamental split between the conservative and the liberal or the progressive part of (not only Slovak) political scene and public opinion.<sup>138</sup>

Kuffa calls liberalism and gender ideology a “liberal manure” which must be “removed from the Slovakian society by bulldozer.”<sup>139</sup> He derogatorily calls his critics from the rows of moderate pro-Western Christians “liberal Christians”.<sup>140</sup> This priest uses a simple language to target a wide range of Christian citizens in Slovakia. Veronika Valkovičová writes that Kuffa is basically “a conventional populist. According to him, the Istanbul Convention is a Trojan horse, which the corrupt Brussels and Bratislava elites are trying to push through the gates of the unsuspecting Slovak nation. The mercenary terminology sounds from the pulpit – the rosary is a weapon, the believers are the army, Slovakia is a fortress. A well-organized and dangerous feminist movement is richly paid. Non-governmental organizations should officially declare their income.”<sup>141</sup>

Content incorrectness and formal vulgarity, his folk tale of the evil “ultraliberalism” have gained Kuffa such popularity that at present it is not uncommon for his sermons to be visited by thousands of people and watched (through various video channels such as YouTube but also through videos posted on pro-Russian disinformation servers) by hundreds of thousands of people. It thus affects a significant part of Slovakian (conservative) society. Unfortunately, thanks to Kuffa, the term “liberalism” has been abnormally degraded in

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<sup>136</sup> Two weeks before the 2020 parliamentary elections in Slovakia (held on February 29), two Roman Catholic priests dedicated the Kotlebists - People's Party Our Slovakia and their chairman Marian Kotleba to God and the Virgin Mary. According to the Catholic faith, this party and its chairman are thus under the protection of God and the Virgin Mary. Scaring with Muslims, liberals and homosexuals represented a part of the consecration (Druha, Ondrej and Mrvová Iva: “My sme meč, ktorý môže ochrániť Slovensko.” Politizácia kresťanstva vrcholí”, *Konzervatívny denník Postoj – Blog*, 25 February 2020, at <https://blog.postoj.sk/51995/my-sme-mec-ktory-moze-ochranit-slovensko-politizacia-krestanstva-vrcholi>). One of the priests who performed the “consecration” was Ján Košíar, who publicly supported Kotleba together with other Roman Catholic priests – for example Miroslav Čajek, Gabriel Juruš or Ignác Juruš before the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in 2016. Ignác Juruš even called for the election of “true national values”, embodied by the *Kotlebists* – People’s Party Our Slovakia, at a mass in Trnava, a city in western Slovakia, which Kotleba personally participated (Vrabcová, Marie: “Slovenská katolícka cirkev nikdy nepovedala jasné nie klerikálnemu nacionalizmu”, *SME*, 13 March 2016, at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20116153/katolici-zehnali-tisovi-aj-kotlebovi.html>).

<sup>137</sup> The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention) is a Council of Europe convention against violence against women and domestic violence which was opened for signature on 11 May 2011, in Istanbul, Turkey. The Convention came into force on 1 August 2014.

<sup>138</sup> The debate was not whether women need to be protected from any form of violence (both groups agree on this), the contradictions are on the issue of gender. Thus, in the question of whether “a person’s gender can be seen as a social construct, which in principle is not related to biological reality at all (man, woman).

<sup>139</sup> Kocúr, Miroslav: “Cirkev a jej hovorca”, *a-omega*, at [http://www.aomega.sk/sk/spolocnost/cirkev\\_a\\_jej\\_hovorca.php](http://www.aomega.sk/sk/spolocnost/cirkev_a_jej_hovorca.php).

<sup>140</sup> Gašparovič, Matej: “Prečo Marián Kuffa hľadá spojencov medzi kresťanskými liberálmi?”, *Konzervatívny denník Postoj – Blog*, 19 November 2019, at <https://blog.postoj.sk/49123/preco-marian-kuffa-hlada-spojencov-mezdi-krestanskymi-liberalmi>.

<sup>141</sup> Valkovičová, Veronika: “Nezáleží na tom, či je Marián Kuffa blázon”, *Kapitál*, 9 January 2019, at <https://kapital-noviny.sk/nezalezi-na-tom-ci-je-marian-kuffa-blazon/>.



Slovakia, the polarization of Slovak society is deepening, the resistance to the West and Western values is growing, and Russia's support for Christian values is growing. Exactly what suits the Kremlin is happening.

However, Priest Kuffa not only expresses himself on the value topics that resonate between the Slovak political elite and the public, but also actively enters politics and is able to influence it. As a result of his considerable public support, he is sought after by several anti-Western and openly pro-Russian politicians. He shone controversially when, after the brutal murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in his house in a small village in western Slovakia in February 2018, which shook the whole of Slovakia, he misleadingly criticized the demonstrations against corruption and the government that created it. In the first round of the presidential elections in Slovakia in 2019, he supported the former communist and member of Mečiar's set, the openly pro-Russian politician Štefan Harabin.<sup>142</sup> In the second round of the same elections, after a personal interview, he supported the candidate for president nominated by the *Direction – Social Democracy party*, Maroš Šefčovič, who wanted to gain support from the conservative spectrum of voters in Slovakia. In the second half of 2019, Marián Kuffa also met with Andrej Danko, chairman of the NC SR from 2016-2020 and chairman of the social-conservative and openly pro-Russian *Slovak National Party*.

In the period between 2016-2020, Russian media particularly praised Danko "for his spontaneous and totally open sympathy for Russia and its political regime and for his attitude to Moscow manifest in his relatively frequent visits to Russia".<sup>143</sup> Indeed, during his term as Speaker of the Slovak Parliament, he visited Russia several times, officially and unofficially, where he met with influential Russian politicians and businessmen. He appeared in the Russian State Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament (June 2018), but also participated in Victory Day – the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany on May 9, 2019 in Moscow. He calls the president of the Russian State Duma Viacheslav Volodin, who is on the sanctions list and is banned from entering the EU, "his friend".<sup>144</sup> Priest Kuffa discussed with Danko about the possibilities of submission and enforcement of the pro-life law. Danko's party also submitted it to the NC SR in December 2019 (after a similar bill from another conservative faction had been rejected in September of the same year), but the bill was not passed.<sup>145</sup>

Marián Kuffa also supported – publicist Jaroslav Daniška is even convinced that the party is unofficially run and candidates selected by priest Marián Kuffa himself<sup>146</sup> – the establishment of the ultra-conservative marginal political party *Christian Democracy – Life and Prosperity*, which he founded (February 4, 2019), and whose position of chairman was taken by his brother Štefan Kuffa. Štefan Kuffa is a radical social conservative who became visible in 2015, when, as a member of the NC SR, he and two other deputies decided to change legislation to ban intentional abortions, artificial insemination and registered partnerships. Women who would still like to be artificially inseminated were proposed to be sent to prison

<sup>142</sup> Martinický, Pavol: "Ako kňaz Kuffa biskupov prekabátil", *Konzervatívny denník Postoj – Blog*, 22 February 2020, at <https://blog.postoj.sk/51908/ako-knaz-kuffa-biskupov-prekabatil>.

<sup>143</sup> Mesežnikov, Grigorij: "A Friend Lost? The Slovak Elections Seen by the Russian Pro-Government Media", *Visegrad Insight*, 31 March 2020, at <https://visegradinsight.eu/a-friend-lost-slovakia-elections-russia/>.

<sup>144</sup> Sliz, Martin: "Dankov obdiv ku Kremľu ukázali aj jeho cesty. V Rusku strávil najviac dní", *Aktuality*, 20 September 2019, at <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/718970/volby-2020-danko-cesty-rusko/>.

<sup>145</sup> Hanus, Martin: "Čo je viac ako dnešná prehra", *Konzervatívny denník Postoj*, 5 December 2019, at <https://www.postoj.sk/49663/co-je-viac-ako-dnesna-prehra>.

<sup>146</sup> Daniška, Jaroslav: "Za čiarou", *Konzervatívny denník Postoj*, 5 December 2019, at <https://www.postoj.sk/48952/za-ciarou>.



for five to twelve years.<sup>147</sup> Štefan Kuffa also strongly advocates the abolition of economic sanctions against Russia and close cooperation with this state. Christian Democracy – Life and Prosperity declares that it “politically implements what Marián Kuffa teaches theologically.”<sup>148</sup> In November 2019, Štefan Kuffa’s party agreed to pre-election cooperation with Kotlebists and the placement of its candidates (including Štefan Kuffa himself) on the Kotlebists list of candidates. It should be noted here that in the parliamentary elections on February 29, 2020, Štefan Kuffa was actually elected to the NC SR and performs parliamentary activities in this (2020-2024) election period.

Unfortunately, even in these cases, it is clear that several politicians, especially from the ranks of Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia, are tastelessly and purposefully abusing Christian priests, but also Christian values and symbols for political purposes. It is a violent politicization of faith, militant understanding of Christianity, which is consciously used against liberalism or liberal democracy and for the own ambitions of politicians, who in principle incline to Russia and Russian social conservatism. It is thus possible to see a certain parallel with the situation in Russia. Here, the ruling Putin’s party United Russia uses the ROC to support its illiberal ideology. In Slovakia, numerous priests, but especially the popular Marián Kuffa, are used (knowingly and unknowingly) for the “cultural war” and the fight against the “liberal enemy”. Despite this, the Episcopal Conference of Slovakia, as the highest body of the Roman Catholic Church in Slovakia, does not agree with the support of its priests for Marian Kotleba and has used reprimands and sanctions, but still fails to effectively suppress the inclination of many priests to political radicalism and condemn clerical nationalism (the Episcopal Conference of Slovakia most often argues that it “cannot dictate political beliefs”<sup>149</sup> to these priests).

It is more than obvious that conservatism, or specifically conservative thinking, in Slovakia today is overwhelmingly influenced by social conservatism, which is being promoted in Russia. In Slovakia, a majority opinion is emerging, which connects conservative teaching and Christian values exclusively with Russia as “a protector of these values.” Not only are many Slovakian politicians who support conservatism, but also a large part of Slovakian public opinion convinced of this. For example, according to an extensive survey by Ipsos Slovakia for the International Republican Institute from May 2017 up to 41 % of Slovaks (most of all V4 countries) think that “Russia has taken the side of traditional European values and Vladimir Putin is a defender of Christendom and traditional European values in areas ranging from the protection of the family unit to defending against Islamic and other non-European cultures.”<sup>150</sup>

Conservatism and Christianity are thus consciously becoming the tools of openly pro-Russian politicians in Slovakia to promote a pro-Russian confrontational understanding of the world. This is a very dangerous trend, which is also mostly accepted by the Slovak public and can gradually completely discredit the ideas and teachings of democratic conservatism, which has its roots in the Western environment. There is a lack of will on the part of Slovak democratic conservatives to publicly declare that Slovakia is part of the West and to claim allegiance to Western democratic values and seek a natural alliance with pro-Western classical liberal politicians.

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<sup>147</sup> Kysel, Tomáš: “Harabin k sebe volá Kuffu, ktorý chcel ženy za umelé oplodnenie posielat’ do väzenia”, *Aktuality*, 16 October 2019, at <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/732458/harabin-k-sebe-vola-kuffu-ktory-chcel-zeny-za-umele-oplodnenie-posielat-do-vazenia/>.

<sup>148</sup> See Martinický, *op. cit.*

<sup>149</sup> See Vrabcová, *op. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> *Public opinion in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia*, International Republican Institute, 24 May 2017, at [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/four\\_country\\_full\\_presentation\\_may\\_24\\_2017.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/four_country_full_presentation_may_24_2017.pdf).



It is also the role of opinion-forming media to clarify and point to this deep misunderstanding, which lies in linking Christian-conservative values explicitly with Russia, and to point out possible intersections with the authentic conservative-liberal democratic spectrum. It is not happening yet and the dramatic polarization not only in Slovak, but also in European society is only growing. On the one hand, the former influential authentic European conservative politicians have deflected from Anglo-Saxon conservatism, become moderate centre-left politicians (mainly due to popular trends such as green environmental policy) and cooperate with the progressive (new) left (a typical example is Angela Merker, who is serving as the chancellor of Germany). On the other hand, there is a relatively broad “social-conservative”, thus a “illiberal camp”, which is synonymous with the aforementioned eurosceptics, populists, radical nationalists, even representatives of the communist (old) left and, unfortunately, democratic right-wing conservatives. This dual postbipolar antagonistic world suits Russia, which has considerable space for maneuvering in the international system. In addition, sophisticated Russian soft power is built on this antagonistic system. Only by singling out moderate pro-Western conservatives from this “illiberal” group will Russian effective soft power be undermined. The strength of this type of moderate pro-Western conservatism is gaining momentum, and the popular Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz is a typical example in this regard.

In Slovakia, however, it is worth noting a hope-bringing initiative called “Christians without Hate”, whose signatories (more than five thousand people, including intellectuals, politicians, artists, priests, but also ordinary people) believe that “Christianity is a religion, which spreads peace, truth and respect for everyone”<sup>151</sup> and refuses to participate on the populist abuse of Christianity and the spread of anti-Western sentiments in the Slovakian society. One of the main signatories is František Mikloško, a former dissident, Christian-conservative politician and unsuccessful presidential candidate, who is personally rooted in the Western, Christian-Judaist tradition and has maintained and presented this trend for a long time.

In the context of specific initiatives and enforced measures in Slovakia in recent times, it is more than obvious that several Slovak (extremely) conservatives and in many cases openly pro-Russian politicians are evidently influenced by Russia’s illiberal soft power. A typical example are mainly the various activities of *Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia*. The public’s public opposition to LGBT people and NGOs following the Russian model is well known. During the pre-election campaign before the March 2019 presidential election – In which Marián Kotleba ran – this party presented billboards entitled “Family is a man and a woman. Stop LGBT”. According to the NGOs that filed a criminal complaint and triggered a public appeal, the text called for discrimination and violations of the human rights of a part of the population.<sup>152</sup>

This party also initiated – three times – bills in the NC SR in the period 2016-2020, which would limit abortions, i. e. tighten the “policy on arbitrary and unjustified abortions,” which according to the party are an “evidence of a distorted ranking of values in society. The whole decades of the ideology of Bolshevik materialism and subsequently liberal egoism contributed negatively to this state.”<sup>153</sup> None of the proposals of the Kotlebists against abortion passed, although the aforementioned priest Marián Kuffa also came to support them in the NC

<sup>151</sup> “My, dolupodpisani občania Slovenskej republiky hlásiaci sa ku kresťanskej viere, sme presvedčení, že kresťanstvo je náboženstvo šíriace pokoj, pravdu a úctu ku každému človeku”, *Kresťania proti nenávisťi*, at <https://krestianiaprotinenavisti.sk/>.

<sup>152</sup> “Kotlebove bilbordy stiahnu. Rozhodla tak firma, ktorá ich prenajíma.”, *Trend*, 12 February 2019, at <https://medialne.trend.sk/marketing/kotlebove-bilbordy-stiahnu-rozhodla-tak-firma-ktora-ich-prenajima>.

<sup>153</sup> “Za ochranu Života, to je hlavná hdonota!”, *LS Naše Slovensko*, 11 October 2019, at <http://www.naseslovensko.net/ls-nase-slovensko-v-nr-sr/za-ochranu-zivota-to-je-hlavna-hodnota/>.



SR. However, this party participated (together with the *Slovak National Party, Direction – Social Democracy party* and other conservative deputies) in the final refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention in February 2020.

After the Kremlin's widely publicized and widely debated action aimed at paralyzing the activities of non-governmental organizations in Russia, this trend spread to Slovakia. In other words, the Russian trend of labeling NGOs as "foreign agents" has also affected Slovakia. Again, the *Kotlebists* played a major role here. During the term of office of the NC SR (2016-2020), they submitted up to three draft laws (for the first time in September 2016). These concerned the limitation of the activities of non-governmental organizations, which are generally perceived as an important element of a functioning democratic and civil society. If any of them receives a subsidy from abroad or from a foreign embassy, it should automatically be designated a "foreign agent". Any promotional material or study of such a non-profit organization should also include the warning "Attention! Foreign agent". According to the *Kotlebists*, the reason for such regulations was to prevent "the ideology and interests of its foreign sponsors from being promoted on the territory of a sovereign state (Slovakia)."<sup>154</sup> through non-governmental organizations.

For this party, but also for Marián Kotleb himself, non-governmental organizations are a symbol of the destabilization of statehood: "Civil unrest and political upheavals in European countries, especially post-socialist states, are most often caused by the U.S. embassy in conjunction with the third sector (non-government) and the media ... this theatre is mostly funded by people like George Soros."<sup>155</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize that concerns about "foreign agents" in Slovakia are not only those of the *Kotlebists*, but also of other political representatives. The turning point in this direction came after the aforementioned murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. After this assassination, tension, indignation and massive protests of the Slovak public grew in Slovak society, which was dissatisfied with the state of the country under the long-term rule of the *Direction – Social Democracy party*. However, these protests were not perceived by the ruling elites as civil protests, but as "coup attempts" and "destabilization of society from abroad". This discourse was even adopted by the acting Prime Minister of Slovakia and the chairman of the *Direction – Social Democracy party*, Róbert Fico. A few days after the assassination, he spoke at a press conference – In the context of public civic pressure on the government – about "total destabilization controlled from abroad" and suggested that public demonstrations were an attempted coup by George Soros.<sup>156</sup> Shortly after the assassination, conspiracy and pro-Russian disinformation Slovak sites such as the "Main News" (Hlavné správy) spread news about an alleged connection of the American billionaire with the murder of the journalist and protests shortly after the murder without any evidence and factual connections.<sup>157</sup> During 2018, Fico continued to present these allegations to the public and permanently discredited the protesters *For Decent Slovakia*,<sup>158</sup> pointed to their alleged foreign funding and disparagingly called them

<sup>154</sup> "Pozor! Zahraničný agent", *LS Naše Slovensko*, 9 October 2019, at <http://www.naseslovensko.net/ls-nase-slovensko-v-nr-sr/pozor-zahranicny-agent/>.

<sup>155</sup> Kotleba, Marián: "O Šorošovi a jeho bábkach", *LS Naše Slovensko*, 20 March 2018, at <http://www.naseslovensko.net/nase-nazory/marian-kotleba-o-sorosovi-a-jeho-babkach/>.

<sup>156</sup> Kern, Miro: "Fico vidí za tlakom na Kaliňáka pokus o prevrat a Sorosa", *Denník N*, 5 March 2018, at <https://dennikn.sk/1050737/fico-vidi-za-tlakom-na-kalinaka-pokus-o-prevrat-a-sorosa/>.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> According to the website of the movement *For Decent Slovakia*, it is an "informal network of active citizens in all regions of Slovakia and some foreign cities, united by the senseless murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and archaeologist Martina Kušnírová." ("O čo nám ide", *Za slušné Slovensko*, at <https://zaslusneslovensko.sk/o-co-nam-ide/>). Their first goal was to put pressure on an independent and thorough investigation of the murders and all the cases about which Ján Kuciak wrote in the form of reverent and later also protest rallies. Their second



“Soros’ children” because, according to him, they are among the organizations paid by billionaire Soros.<sup>159</sup>

This version was gradually taken over by other mainly anti-Western and pro-Russian politicians in Slovakia, such as another nominee of the *Direction – Social Democracy party* and long-time chairman of the Committee of the NC SR for European Affairs (2012-2020) radical political leftist and Marxist and a great supporter of Kremlin policy (but also that of China, Belarus or Cuba) Ľuboš Blaha. He wrote mainly on social networks, but in his contributions, just like in the ones of Fico, he wrote about the upcoming “maidan”, i. e. the coup d’état under the heading of the West and the then pro-Western Slovakian President Andrej Kiska, corporate media and established pro-Western media.<sup>160</sup> In addition to them, Peter Marček, a non-affiliated former member of the NC SR (2016-2020), also known as a radical supporter of Russian politics, spoke out strongly against the forthcoming “the maidanization of politics”. After the first wave of civil unrest in March 2018, Marček said that “the style of the call, the procedures and the connections resemble the manual of ‘colour revolutions’ on civil street protests organized in Europe by financial speculator Georg Soros through a large octopus of NGOs linked to *the Open Society Foundation* linked to schools, academia and government institutions!”<sup>161</sup>

Such a perception of civil society by the leading political illiberal representatives in Slovakia (sitting in the NC SR) creates a dangerous, one-sided and radical view. In principle, this view identifies with, but even copies, the view of ruling Russian politicians (including Russian president Putin himself), for whom NGOs pose an extreme threat to the state’s internal sovereignty and stability and are synonymous with Western destabilization and disruption. In this regard, this type of organization has repeatedly been verbally attacked by Putin in the media or during his public speeches.<sup>162</sup> This view resolutely rejects the possibility that opposition protests may be spontaneous, initiated by ordinary people due to massive levels of corruption, non-transparency and elements of authoritarianism in the country.<sup>163</sup>

Protection against “colour revolutions” thus became the official civilizationalist Kremlin narrative, which proclaimed that Russia had become a “besieged fortress” under the threat of attack by “foreign enemies”. The Kremlin subsequently began to use this narrative not only to consolidate society and mobilize patriotic forces within the country, but also to gain the support of anti-democratic and “illiberal” society and politicians outside Russia.<sup>164</sup>

The growing trend of negative, even hateful perceptions of civil society (not only in Slovakia, but also in other European countries) can have very dangerous and fatal consequences

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requirement was to form a new credible government whose members would not be associated with the mafia and organized crime. Following Robert Fico’s allegations, the organizers of the *For a Decent Slovakia* protest demonstrated transparent funding and answered questions about its functioning in the media.

<sup>159</sup> Mihočková, Eva: “Ako Fico Sorosom škandalizuje vlastnú vládu”, *Trend*, 26 November 2018, at <https://www.trend.sk/trend-archiv/ako-fico-sorosom-skandalizuje-vlastnu-vladu>.

<sup>160</sup> Blaha, Ľuboš: “Pokus o majdan na Slovensku a jeho aktéri”, 14 October 2018, at [https://www.noveslovo.sk/prispevok-v-blogu/Pokus\\_o\\_majdan\\_na\\_Slovensku\\_a\\_jeho\\_akteri](https://www.noveslovo.sk/prispevok-v-blogu/Pokus_o_majdan_na_Slovensku_a_jeho_akteri).

<sup>161</sup> Marček, Peter: “Verejná výzva občanom Slovenska: Slováci nie sú Ukrajinci! – Nedovoľme opozícii majdanizovať Slovensko!”, *Slovensko-Ruská spoločnosť*, 14 March 2018, at <http://www.srspol.sk/clanek-peter-marcek-verejna-vyzva-obcanom-slovenska-slovaci-nie-su-ukrajinci-nedovolme-opozicii-majdanizovat-slovensko-16200.html>.

<sup>162</sup> See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>163</sup> It is true, however, that in most cases, democratization during the “colour revolutions” was supported by Western funding. However, it is almost impossible to find out exactly to what extent these means were decisive for political transformation. In any case, “it would be a mistake to attribute revolutions solely to the West’s efforts, as the political activation of the masses among the traditionally apathetic population requires much more than funding of a few selected members of NGOs” (*Ibid.*, p. 151).

<sup>164</sup> See Kurfürst *op. cit.*, p. 266-271.



in the future. Pluralistic civil society and participation in public affairs is a key element of a functioning liberal democracy. Specifically, any indication that society has expressed resistance (within democratic and civil law mechanisms) to the ruling class can be suppressed and discredited by the argument of an organized “colour” or “Western” coup, or “maidan”. Russia’s attitude towards civil society thus inspires and encourages other politicians in Slovakia, who see civil society as a hostile element and a threat to statehood.

### 7. Soft power and support for Russian foreign policy

The information given above suggests that Russia has soft power, which contains illiberal values, and which is accepted positively and is quite attractive for politicians, but also for ordinary citizens in Slovakia. They consider Russia to be a leader in promoting these values. Most importantly, Russia’s soft power attraction does what soft power is supposed to do: grant legitimacy and moral authority to its foreign policy. This can be seen in the relatively recent decisions of Russian foreign policy: the annexation of Crimea (2014) and involvement in the war in Syria (2015), or the crisis in Venezuela (2019). The European Union’s decision to sanction Russia met with heated opposition from political persons in Slovakia who positively identified with Russia.

In practice, this means that some politicians and public opinion in Slovakia did not disapprove of the unprecedented and illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory by Russia, but instead accepted the Russian narrative that Russia only heard the people of Crimea, who decided on a voluntary connection with Russia in “a free referendum”. Likewise, this group of politicians and the public has strongly opposed the EU’s restrictive measures in connection with the crisis in Ukraine (diplomatic measures or various forms of economic sanctions). One of the biggest critics of these measures in Slovakia has been the abovementioned Andrej Danko, according to whom sanctions do not solve anything – they are “ineffective and should be lifted.”<sup>165</sup> Danko’s frequent visits to Moscow and his de facto legitimization of Russian foreign policy (from the position of the Speaker of the NC SR, i. e. the second highest constitutional official in Slovakia) “has led to immense admiration of Danko in Moscow. Russian actors held up the example of Andrej Danko as a role model for politicians of other states.”<sup>166</sup> In addition, “The Russian media liked to quote statements by Andrej Danko upholding that the Russian president Putin has no real rival among European politicians, that U.S. military bases should never appear in Slovakia and that he, Andrej Danko, will always fight to bring the EU and the Russian Federation closer together, as well as to lift sanctions against Russia, which are too stupid.”<sup>167</sup>

Similarly, the Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia are strongly opposed to the sanctions against Russia. In December 2018, the party addressed an official letter (signed by party chairman Marian Kotleba) to Slovakian Prime Minister (2018-2020) Peter Pellegrini, urging him to “stop the growing anti-Russian rampage and not to vote at the forthcoming European Council (13-14 December) (as Slovakia’s official representative) for further prolongation of economic sanctions against Russia.”<sup>168</sup> Members of the Direction – Social Democracy party also tend to disagree with the sanctions against Russia, including the party

<sup>165</sup> “Sankcie voči Rusku treba podľa Danka zrušiť. Danko podľa SaS nechápe súvislosti”, *Sme*, 11 October 2018, at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20935538/sankcie-voci-rusku-treba-podla-danka-zrusit-podla-sas-nechape-suvislosti.html>.

<sup>166</sup> See Mesežnikov *op. cit.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> See Uhrík *op. cit.*



chairman Robert Fico, who dubbed them “meaningless and dysfunctional”<sup>169</sup> at the EU summit in Brussels in 2016. According to Fico, they are also in “conflict with the interests of Slovakia.”<sup>170</sup> The unaffiliated above-mentioned pro-Russian former member of the NC SR Peter Marček expressed solidarity with Kremlin policy and even visited the annexed Crimean Peninsula twice (2018, 2019) and even the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (2019) illegally declared by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. In both disputed territories, he met with local politicians loyal to Moscow.<sup>171</sup>

The same can be said about the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, which was condemned by Western powers and influential Western politicians. On the other hand, it was openly celebrated by anti-Western and especially strongly defined political and civic forces. They perceived this Russian military intervention from two perspectives: First, they saw it as the only possible solution that could defeat the so-called Islamic State, as opposed to the “incompetent West” (the EU and U.S.). Moreover, this intervention, which, according to them, took place legitimately and at the invitation of the Syrian government, is intended to lead to a “fair” establishment of global multipolarity and to a disruption of the U.S. hegemony. The aforementioned politician Blaha confirmed the Russian narrative stating: “Russia, together with Iran, is cleansing Syria of the Islamic State wanting to restore stability to the country. They are helping the legitimate Syrian government in full respect of international law, because Syria has asked their help against terrorists. On the contrary, the U.S. regularly violates international law, has attacked sovereign Syria several times, and the U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia, is allegedly funding Islamic terrorists. So: the ‘bad’ Russia respects international law and helps fight terrorists, the ‘great’ U.S. violates the law and contributes to the mess in Syria.”<sup>172</sup>

Second, Russia's intervention in Syria has been interpreted, as mentioned above, as a necessary action to protect Christians from the dangers of the Islamic State. This thesis was presented to the Slovakian society, for example, by Ján Čarnogurský, at the third International Scientific Symposium “Slavic Languages and Cultures in the Contemporary World” at Lomonosov University in Moscow, where he emphasized that “Russia is now the strategic protector of Christians in Syria.”<sup>173</sup> Čarnogurský is a former Slovak Christian Democratic politician, prime minister and radical supporter of Russian politics and president Putin, who leads the Slovak-Russian society, but is also part of the prominent Valdai International Discussion Club.<sup>174</sup>

<sup>169</sup> “Fico na sumite EÚ označil sankcie voči Rusku za nezmyselné a nefunkčné”, *Pravda*, 21 October 2016, at <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/408664-fico-na-sumite-eu-oznaci-sankcie-voci-rusku-za-nezmyselne-a-nefunkcne/>.

<sup>170</sup> See Marušiak *op. cit.*, p. 267.

<sup>171</sup> “Nezaradený poslanec Marček sa zúčastnil osláv v Donecku, nejde o prvú spornú návštevu”, *Sme*, 21 May 2019, at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22126320/nezaradeny-poslanec-marcek-sa-zucastnil-oslav-v-donecku-nejde-o-prvu-spornu-navstevu.html>.

<sup>172</sup> “Blaha zhrnul ako sa vo svetových konfliktoch správajú USA a Rusko”, *Slovensko-ruská spoločnosť*, 25 May 2018, at <http://www.srspol.sk/clanek-blaha-zhrnul-ako-sa-vo-svetovych-konfliktoch-spravaju-usa-a-ako-rusko-16718.html>.

<sup>173</sup> Čarnogurský, Ján: “Slovanské národy v dvoch integračných zoskupeniach”, *Slovensko-Ruská spoločnosť*, 30 May 2016, at <http://www.srspol.sk/clanek-jan-carnogursky-slovanske-narody-v-dvoch-integracnych-zoskupeniach-12595.html>.

<sup>174</sup> The Valdai International Discussion Club is a regular congress of experts specializing in the study of Russian domestic and foreign policy. “In practice, this means that the club declares that it invites impartial experts to hold discussions. In many cases, however, these are pro-Russian oriented foreign (mostly Western) experts. Subsequently, these experts are enabled to meet their Russian counterparts, who are complemented by Russian political leaders, and an ‘open dialogue’ takes place” (See Solik, *Strategický...*, *op. cit.*, p. 348).



In sum, Russian soft power is not simply about finding inspiration in Russian values. Those who are attracted to Russian ideological soft power also support controversial Russian policies, making it easier for Russia to operate in the world and challenge Western foreign policy.

## **8. Conclusion**

Based on this study, which looked at Russian soft power, it is possible to assume that the Kremlin benefits from an illiberal anti-Western model that is attractive to a large number of actors in the international system. The illiberal values created by the Kremlin are deliberately broad-spectrum and purposeful in order to capture and attract the widest possible audience. With its values (including nationalism and law-and-order themes, traditional and family values), Russia thus becomes an ideal illiberal model. This broader Putin's political ideology is defined by Alina Polyakova as "post-communist neo-conservatism."<sup>175</sup> The study emphasized social-conservative values as one of the key categories of illiberal Russian soft power and their influence in Slovakia.

This type of category shows considerable success in Slovakia, and Russia has supporters and admirers in this country (from the ranks of political elites and the general public) who consider it an unrivalled leader in promoting these values. It is important to note that these values are voluntarily accepted by these actors without the Kremlin having to engage in any increased and coercive activities in order to promote them. This is one of the reasons why it is clear that Russia's soft power in the case of political values does not have to be understood exclusively instrumentally, which largely distorts the long-established image of Russian coercive soft power, which relies on hard elements of power.

In essence, these values are attractive to those actors who distance themselves from liberal-democratic values and seek an oppositional anti-system alternative. Underestimating these values can have fatal consequences, as the "illiberal" form of soft power is not just about attractiveness and the actors who follow it. This form of power does what Nye says it is supposed to do: give legitimacy and moral authority to controversial Russian foreign policy decisions. This support subsequently makes it much easier and more efficient for Russia to operate and manoeuvre in the international system.

The strong conservative-traditionalist agenda understandably existed in many countries at various levels before Russia began to create this type of political values in the context of soft power, but the sharp rise of anti-systemic, anti-democratic, and various hybrid populist political parties in Europe allowed Russia to gain ideological allies. At the same time, these parties can legitimize the normative content of their message by demonstrating that these values (following the example of Russia) can be put into practice in society. Moreover, as already mentioned, this alliance creates room for a sense of belonging, which protects Russia from the political effects of its more controversial foreign policy decisions and brings partners and loud support during ostracism from leading Western politicians (for example after the annexation of Russian Crimea and subsequent sanctions on Russia by the EU). A typical example in this regard are the speeches of various politicians in the European Parliament (including representatives of Kotlebists – People's Party Our Slovakia), where they openly support Russia and, conversely, criticize the EU and the West. In other words, Kremlin's soft power seeks to ensure that political outcomes in targeted countries serve Russia's national interests. Most vulnerable are countries with weak legal and anticorruption measures or where key domestic groups share Russia's interests or worldview.

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<sup>175</sup> Polyakova, Alina: "Strange Bedfellows: Putin and Europe's Far Right", *World Affairs*, vol. 177, nº. 3 (September/October 2014), p. 39.



As for the political consequences of illiberal Russian soft power not only in the context of Slovakia, or generally Central Europe, three possible and risky trends need to be taken into account. The first is the growing awareness of Russian elites that Russia's illiberal soft power has an upward trend not only in Slovakia, Central Europe, but also in the world, and can be used effectively for Russia's attempts to become the leader of the "illiberal" world as a counterweight of the liberal world. As demonstrated, the number of supporters of Russian politics, not only from the public but also from influential politicians, is growing rapidly. During the term of office of the NC SR (2016-2020), 59 (out of 150) deputies were members of the parliamentary "Group for a Friendship with the Russian Federation". The Kremlin is aware of this growing support and Russian political leaders are simply taking advantage of Europe's political and economic problems to stir a pot of brewing nationalist and anti-western sentiment that is not of his making. In this context, the anti-western populist parties are gaining momentum.

The second is "the potential for increasing populist and conservative politics in the West and across the world to bolster public approval of these conservative policies. This has the potential to create a 'virtuous' cycle, whereby Russia, as a model of conservative governance, helps external elites with conservative values and illiberal aspirations to become more mainstream in their home countries, which then only reinforces the capacities of Russian foreign policy."<sup>176</sup>

And finally, this Russian illiberal soft power – especially at the level of traditionalism, conservatism and the preference for Christian values – is taking the agenda by classical right-wing conservative politicians, who set themselves against progressive left-wing trends in Europe but see a future in the West. I consider this point to be crucial on two levels: as mentioned above, the key will be to prevent the deepening polarization and fragmentation in Slovak society of pro-Western "liberals" and pro-Russian "conservatives" and to re-engage pro-Western conservatives as natural allies of classical liberalism. Here, however, the second problem arises and that is the perception of the EU. Neither education and training nor rigorous marketing have proved to be effective in presenting the current EU in a positive light. More and more people and politicians are calling for reform and a better dialogue of "the core of Europe" with the "new" EU countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The above-mentioned shifts in global politics, the growing Russian influence in the region, but unfortunately also the EU's insufficient ability to adequately and promptly address urgent global challenges worsen the liberal environment and reinforce populist illiberal trends in Slovakia and Central Europe as a whole. In one of his interviews, this author argues that the EU is undoubtedly a useful and necessary project which the V4 states, specifically Slovakia, should remain a part of. However, if the EU is to remain attractive and succeed with growing extremism, populism and Russia's illiberal alternative, it needs to be reformed. "The EU needs rational reforms, otherwise exit attempts (following the example of the United Kingdom) will be repeated by other Member States. However, problems must be solved objectively and not demagogically. The EU needs to return to its original goals, which are, in particular, effective economic cooperation and the protection of the Schengen area. It is not adequate to strive to build "a European superstate". In addition, there is a need to bring the EU closer to ordinary people, to systematically address migration policy in particular, and to spend more money on the (real) fight against terrorism and organized crime. It is necessary to make the system of drawing subsidies transparent so that they help villages and cities or science and research, not private companies. It is important to get rid of unnecessary bureaucracy and abolish inefficient

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<sup>176</sup> See Kaczmarek and Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 15.



European agencies and offices.”<sup>177</sup> It means, rejecting euroskepticism, but demanding rational reform of the EU.

Given the growing bitterness and mistrust in the West, and specifically in Western institutions, it is Russia that offers a supposedly attractive alternative to the public and political elites in Central Europe through an illiberal antagonistic stance. In other words, the reluctance of standard politicians in the West to try to reform the EU creates crowds of frustrated voters and politicians who are beginning to look to Russia and thus move away from the West and Western integration groupings. I believe that the position of the countries of Central Europe (including Slovakia) depends precisely on whether the EU will be reformed and whether the dialogue on the part of the Western (founding) members and the region of Central Europe will improve. If this does not happen it could mean a definitive inclination of this region towards the illiberal Russian model and thus another form of (dangerous) imitation.

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<sup>177</sup> See Solik, *Je dobrým...*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.



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