

## Polarization in Slovakia in the Context of the Assassination Attempt on the Prime Minister

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## Abstract



### Keywords

assassination,  
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Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico was shot at by an attacker on 15<sup>th</sup> of May in the town of Handlová after the cabinet meeting. The general consensus attributes the attack to high social polarization, but no agreement exists on who caused this polarization. That itself is a characteristic of a polarized society. According to the V-DEM Project data, Slovakia is the third most polarized country in Europe, right after their neighbors Poland and Hungary. During May 2024, the dominant public sentiment in Slovak media and on social media was anxiety, followed by anger. Right after the attack anger grew substantially, while anxiety only slightly. What differed from the other attacks in the region is that typically, attacks that hurt or kill people bring the emotions of sadness and warmth into the forefront, while the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister did not. This suggests that even the segment of the population that condemned the attack had difficulty feeling empathy for the victim. At the same time, attempts to label the attacker as a ‘radical progressive’ or a ‘militant xenophobic nationalists’ and attribute him to the other side of the ideological spectrum became common. This suggests that the general consensus might be right—polarization in Slovakia is getting worse, and it is starting to manifest in the form of political violence.

Slovak prime minister Robert Fico was shot at by 71-year-old Juraj Cintula from Levice on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, shortly after 2 PM, as Fico met members of the public at a cabinet retreat in the Slovak town of Handlová. In the past, the attacker worked as a security guard in a shopping center. He had a legally owned gun. The assailant faces 25 years to life in prison and has been charged with attempted premeditated murder and terrorism. The attack came after widespread public protests against the government of Robert Fico, led by the current opposition parties, that had brought tens of thousands<sup>1</sup> of people into the streets every week for months, starting from 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2023<sup>2</sup>. Members of the coalition parties accuse the opposition of fuelling polarization and blame the media for spreading anti-governmental narratives; the opposition claims that the coalition is trying to shift the burden of responsibility. Meanwhile, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, societal polarization has never been higher in Slovakia.

Robert Fico was not the first victim of political violence in recent years. Just two years ago, on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2022, a politically motivated attacker shot two people to death in an LGBTIQ+ bar named ‘Tepláreň’ in Bratislava. A less-known fact is that it was a target of opportunity, eventually chosen because of its accessibility. Original plan of the attacker was Prime Minister Eduard Heger, but the attacker could not reach him. Other priority targets were members of the Jewish community or COVID pandemic crisis managers. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October this year, an unknown woman broke into the garden of the current Slovak president, Zuzana Čaputová, and was pacified by her security detail.

The assassination attempt on Robert Fico was a rare incident in the sense that it was an attack on a prime minister. But not when it comes to political violence in general. According to the ACLED project, which unites 200 analysts and experts mapping political violence and disorder worldwide, it has been on the rise for years, with documented cases from Germany, France, Sweden or the USA (Bynum et al., 2021), caused by both far right and far left.

Murders of politicians are relatively rare in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024) but they happen every few years, among the most prominent being the murder of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in Belgrade in 2003 and British Labor MP Jo Cox in 2016. What both murders have in common is

that they took place at a time of high polarization and burning passions—Đinđić was assassinated after Serbia's turn to the West and a vigorous campaign against organized crime, Cox just before Britain voted to leave the European Union, known as ‘Brexit’.

The authors analyzed the effects of polarization in Slovakia, public sentiments pre- and post-attack, and offered insights into some of the main narratives that started to spread in both media and social networks.

- 1 “Protivládne protesty zaznamenali rekordnú účasť.” (2024, February 2). Košice online. Retrieved February 5, 2024, from <https://www.kosiceonline.sk/protivladne-protesty-zaznamenali-rekordnu-ucast>
- 2 Vilček, I. (2023, December 7). “Dost bylo Fica! Tisíce lidí v Bratislavě protestovaly proti vládě.” Novinky.cz. Retrieved May 20, 2024, from <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/zahranicni-dost-bylo-v-fica-tisice-lidi-v-bratislave-protestovaly-proti-vlade-40453535>

## 1 Polarization in Slovakia

Social polarization means the division of society into groups with contrasting values and ideological attitudes. A certain level of polarization is normal in societies that tolerate different views. If it goes beyond a certain level, division turns into disintegration and groups with different opinions turn into tribes that see each other as rivals with incompatible goals. High polarization begins to create an 'us versus them' mentality, nurturing hostility and undermining constructive dialogue and cooperation (Glasl, 1982).

High social polarization has a number of negative effects on social cohesion, socioeconomic wellbeing, peace and security. Among many others, it undermines social cohesion by creating an environment of mutual distrust and suspicion between groups, thus weakening collective identity and the sense of community (Delhey et al., 2018). It also hinders cooperation and the search for compromise, as polarized groups tend to dismiss opposing views as illegitimate, making it difficult to engage in reasonable discussions and find common ground (Hrbková et al., 2024). High polarization renders it difficult to agree on priorities, which results in the society's inability to plan and make long-term cultural and economic investments, and manage crises (Kosnáč & Gloss, 2023a). It also escalates the conflict by reinforcing group identities and promoting a black-and-white vision of the world with a zero-sum mentality that increases the likelihood of violence or extremism (Piazza, 2023). Finally, it reduces trust and reinforces tribalism, which in turn reinforces corruption and nepotism, as people in low-trust environments tend to trust only those closest to them. This weakens state institutions and, consequently, society as a whole (Brown et al., 2006).

Slovakia was already one of the moderately polarized countries in 2000, when social polarization in Europe was beginning to be measured by the V-DEM Project (see Figure 1 following), using predominantly annual expert surveys. Since then, polarization in Slovakia has been stagnating or rising, with almost negligible exceptions between 2010 and 2012 (Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, & Teorell, n.d.). The sharpest increases in social polarization in a single year were recorded in years 2006, 2015 and 2019.

The steepest long-term growth in polarization is recorded between 2019 and 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic is no doubt partly responsible for this steep growth;

many people found it very difficult to bear the state's intrusion into their privacy, limitations of civil liberties, and increases of online censorship. Most people in the country had no idea that the state even had such (emergency) powers, and it was a shock to them that greatly reduced their sense of security and control over their lives. Trust in state institutions as such also declined, and trust in the Slovak government was measured at an all-time low (14%, during Eduard Heger's government) (Kosnáč & Gloss, 2023b).

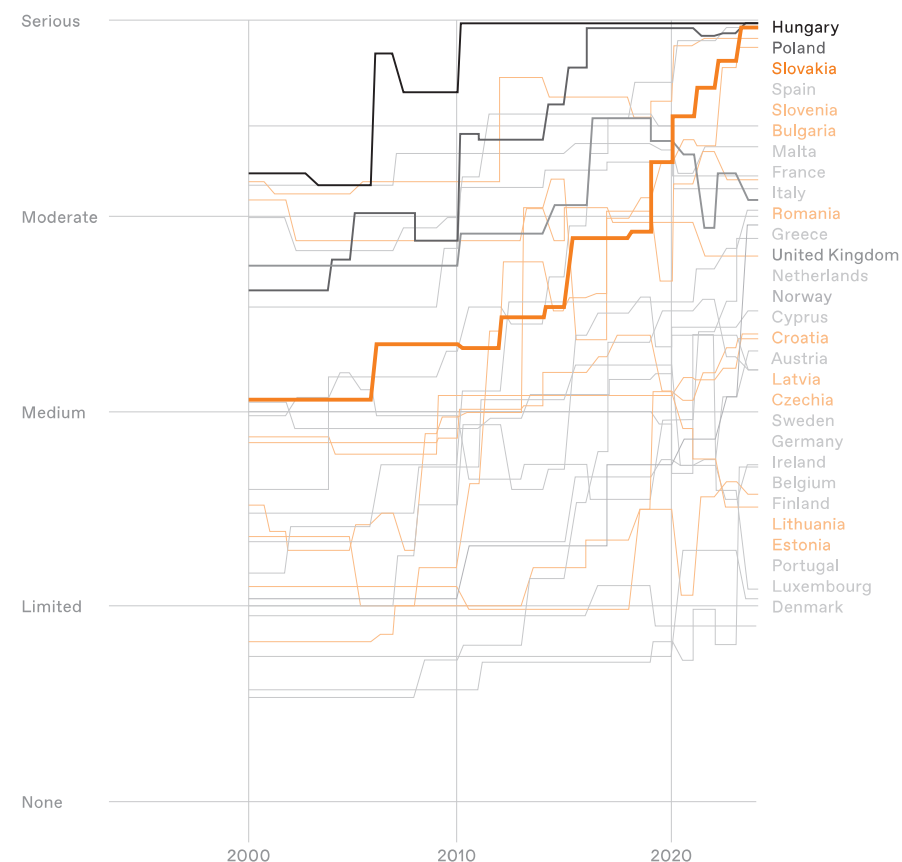


Figure 1 Overview of the evolution of societal polarization in Slovakia between 2000 and 2023<sup>3</sup>

3 Medziorský, J.'s X profile. Post from 16<sup>th</sup> May 2024. Available at: <https://x.com/medziorský/status/1791048759570252088?lang=bn> [Accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2024].

We do not know exactly what factors are responsible for social polarization, and the influences varies per country, but research shows that in general ruling elites have a large influence on polarization of a country (Santoro et al., 2021), and following from their political positions also the biggest share of responsibility, as they usually have the most direct executive powers, and the most media space.

General public sentiment in the media and social media could thus tell us something about the general sentiments in society, and how they have been changed by the attack on the top political elite in Slovakia—the Prime Minister.

## ② Public sentiment before and after the attack

Shortly after the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico, a content moderation company active in Slovakia, ELV.ai, which moderates a significant amount of social media, media, and blog traffic in the CEE region, released data concerning the nature of sentiment changes in the months preceding the attempted assassination, and in the hours following, focusing on moderated content that was deemed potentially toxic.<sup>4</sup> This provides a unique insight into the nature of the public discourse surrounding the event as it includes data that was in fact moderated, despite most of the content remaining online; to date, studies of social media content analysis around a national crisis rely exclusively on unmoderated content still online.

The data from ELV.ai were further analyzed in comparison to data from the 2023 Prague school shooting at Charles University. The results showed that in both cases, anger significantly increased, but the anger surrounding the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister increased even more than in comparison to the Prague shooting. In addition, uncertainty and anxiety also increased in both incidents. However, whereas sadness and warmth increased overall in the Prague shooting data, data around the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister showed a marked decrease in sadness and warmth (a positive emotion associated with connection with others or lovingness). This marker is unexpected for any shooting event, as typically sadness over an attempted murder, particularly during the first 48 hours where it was unclear that Prime Minister Fico would survive the attempted assassination and was undergoing multiple surgery's in critical condition. The reversal of emotional reactions there appears to show that, while the Prague shooting was generally viewed as a tragedy worthy of empathy, this was not the case for the Prime Minister's assassination attempt. Instead, sadness went down and so did warmth, suggesting that the overall media landscape showed proportionally a shift towards more anger and anxiety and less sadness and warmth. This is not to say that, overall, the population was

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that it was moderated or censored. ELV.ai noted that most of the content flagged for moderation was, in fact, left online after review. See: Apolen, P. (2024, May 22). "Slovensko potrebuje upokojenie. Prejav y hnevu na internete po útoku na Fica vzrástli o 53 percent." Forbes. Retrieved August 10, 2024, from <https://www.forbes.sk/slovensko-potrebuje-upokojenie-prejav-y-hnevu-na-internete-po-utoku-na-fica-vzrastli-o-53-percent/>.



experiencing happiness; as in the Czech case, happiness was significantly lower in the data post shooting. Nevertheless, different pockets of social media can have unique reactions that drive the overall trends in these emotional reactions.<sup>5</sup>

The moderated content also showed that this anxiety was not uniformly distributed across the population. Certain segments of society, particularly those aligned with the opposition or disenfranchised by the current government's policies, exhibited higher levels of anxiety. These groups were more likely to express concerns about the direction in which the country was heading, fearing that their voices were being marginalized in the public discourse. Interestingly, the sentiment data indicated a significant correlation between anxiety and discussions surrounding national security and identity. This correlation suggests that the public's anxiety was closely tied to perceptions of external and internal threats, which were often framed in the context of immigration, EU relations, and minority rights. The political rhetoric around these issues had been increasingly nationalistic, further fueling public anxiety and contributing to a polarized environment.

The data clearly showed that while anxiety had been the dominant emotion before the attack, it was quickly overtaken by anger in the aftermath. This shift in sentiment was particularly evident in discussions that labeled the attacker as either a 'radical progressive' or a 'militant nationalist', with both sides of the ideological spectrum attempting to distance themselves from the act while simultaneously blaming the other. This blame-shifting further exacerbated the existing polarization, as people increasingly saw the event through the lens of their pre-existing biases.

One of the most striking aspects of the data was the marked decrease in sentiments of sadness and warmth—emotions that are typically expected to rise following a tragic event such as an attempted assassination. This deviation from the norm suggests a deep-seated disillusionment and lack of empathy within the Slovak public. Even among those who condemned the attack, there was a notable absence of warmth, often associated with compassion and a sense of community.

This lack of empathy was not just an anomaly but rather indicative of the broader social dynamics at play. The assassination attempt did not evoke the usual human response to violence, which is typically characterized by collective mourning and solidarity. Instead, the data showed that sadness decreased as anger surged, indicating that the public's reaction was more about reinforcing ideological positions than about processing the tragedy on a human level.

In the wake of the assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, in the town of Handlová, Slovakia experienced a dramatic shift in public sentiment. The incident, which followed a cabinet meeting, quickly

captured the attention of the media and the public, intensifying the already high levels of polarization within the country. A thorough analysis of media coverage before and after the event, conducted using the CulturePulse ARES (Automated Real-time Emotion Sensing) tool, reveals critical insights into how public sentiment evolved during this period of national crisis.

#### CulturePulse ARES Media Analysis: Tracking Social Shifts

The ARES tool, which specializes in analyzing large-scale media data, was employed to examine the emotional tone of the discourse surrounding the assassination attempt. This analysis covered a broad spectrum of media sources, including mainstream news outlets, blogs, and moderated content, providing a comprehensive view of the public's emotional response. By examining the digital footprints left by public discourse, ARES offers a sophisticated understanding of the emotional and cognitive dynamics that drive these conversations. This methodology is particularly valuable for uncovering the underlying social tensions and identifying potential pathways to foster dialogue and mitigate conflict. Such insights are crucial for enhancing social stability and cohesion in Slovakia, especially during this period of heightened social turbulence.

The data presented in the subsequent graphs are derived from CulturePulse's ARES platform, which provides near-real-time monitoring of global media, with the latest data available as of May 19<sup>th</sup>. An analysis of Slovak media during this period reveals a marked increase in events characterized by 'conflict' or 'escalation towards conflict'. Conversely, there was no significant rise in events characterized by 'cooperation' or 'movement towards peace'. The following graphs illustrate the frequency and distribution of these four types of events as reported in Slovak media during the relevant period.

An analysis of the Slovak media reveals a significant increase in events characterized by or associated with 'conflict' and 'escalation towards conflict'. In contrast, there is no corresponding increase in events that denote or describe 'cooperation' or 'movement towards peace'. The following graphs (Figure 2 and 3) provide a detailed representation of the frequency and nature of these four categories of events as reported in Slovakian media during the observed period.

<sup>5</sup> Authors realize that comparison of attacks on university students in the Czech Republic has a different cultural and social context than an attack on a controversial political figure in Slovakia. We use this case to underline the differences between sentiments during two national crises that happened in quick succession in culturally related geopolitical areas, not to suggest that they are the same type of crisis.

What is noteworthy here is that, unlike the 2018 Kuciak murders, which had media narratives focused on discussions of arrests, demonstrations, and rallies, the most common themes related to Fico's attempted assassination were criticisms and denunciations. This does not suggest a cohesive response to the event reminiscent of the media response to the 2018 Kuciak assassinations. This is reflected in a general lack of action by 'civil society' organizations, for example organizations and movements such as the Movement "For a Decent Slovakia" (Sk. *Za slušné Slovensko*) demonstrated extensively and effectively after the Kuciak assassinations resulting in the displacement of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fico government. The overall movement (not just any one organization) was motivated to action under the auspices that assassinations of key actors of a democratic state—such as journalists—are unacceptable. However, this movement did not appear to mobilize even a single action after the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico, despite the clear message of then President Čaputová that such an action was an unacceptable attack on democracy, a message echoed by then president-elect Pellegrini, and a general alignment that an assassination of a democratically elected national leader would clearly be a violation of stated ideals of the movement. As such, the failure of 'civil society' actors demonstrate how deeply rooted polarization is in Slovak society: movements that were founded to appear to transcend politics to address concerns that span the concerns of the political spectrum were unable (or unwilling) to effectively mobilize in the wake of Fico's attempted assassination.

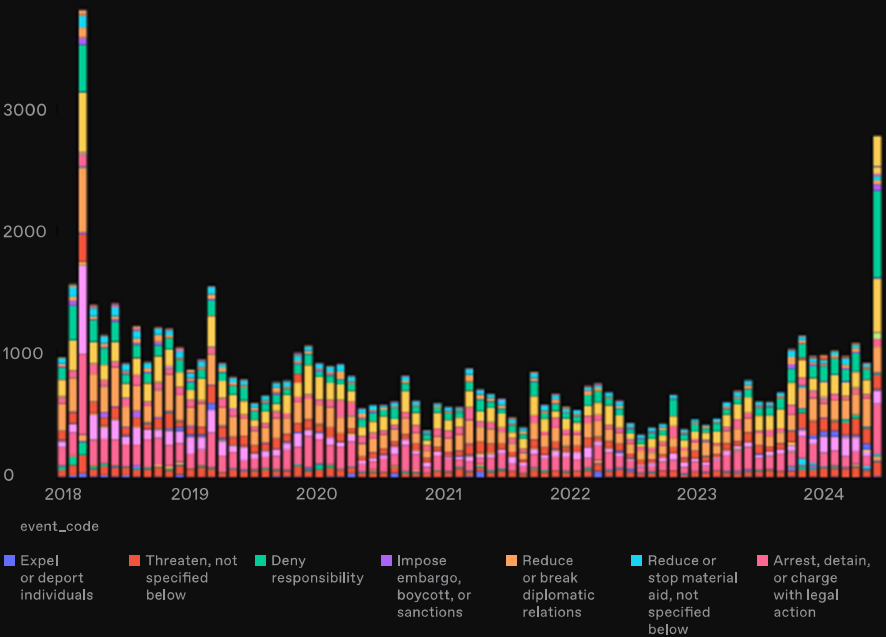


Figure 2 Conflict Event Codes over Time in Slovakia

The analysis also identified two predominant themes among the events categorized as 'moves towards conflict' or indicative of negative impacts that could exacerbate conflict in relation to the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Fico. The most prevalent theme involves pessimistic commentary anticipating potential negative outcomes, such as the possibility of Fico's death or the escalation of tensions and violence. The second most prevalent theme is characterized by threats of force. For comparison, in 2018, the two most prevalent themes were also centered around pessimistic commentary and discussions of violent repression, likely reflecting the nature and impact of the Kuciak murder.

It is elucidating to observe that the theme of pessimistic commentary has consistently dominated media narratives in both 2018 and 2024. This theme has, in fact, emerged as the most prevalent media narrative over the past several years. When focusing specifically on reports of pessimistic comments (see Figure 4), there is a discernible increase leading up to both the Kuciak murder and the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Fico. Additionally, it is notable that a period of cooling down follows the Kuciak murder, suggesting a potential similar decline in pessimistic commentary later in 2024, provided there is no further escalation of tensions.

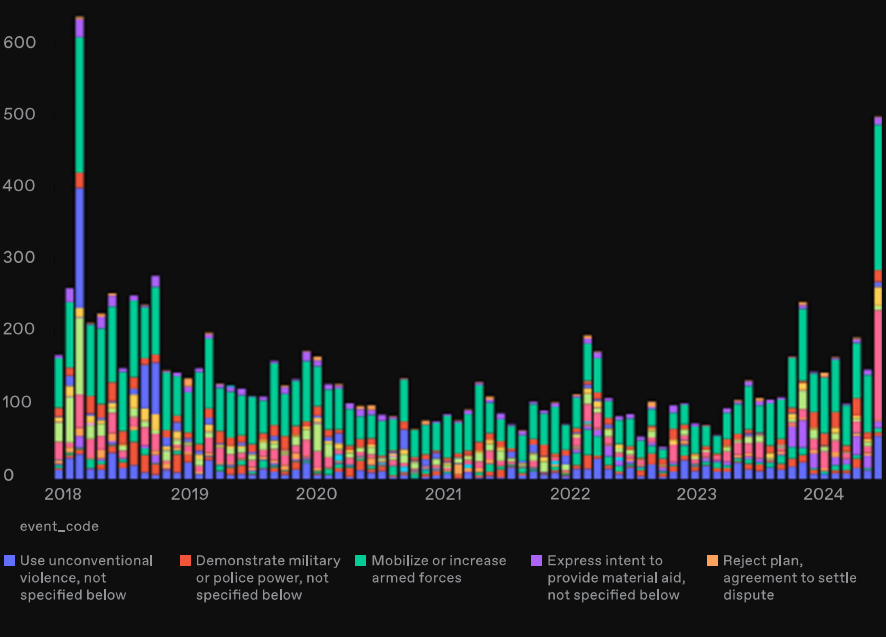


Figure 3 Moves toward Conflict Event Codes over Time in Slovakia

This suggests that, starting in late 2022, around the time that the Slovak government, then led by Prime Minister Heger, lost a no-confidence vote, there was a steady uptick in pessimistic comments leading up to the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Fico. This point appeared to be a reversal of a generally downward trend that had been in place since the Kuciak murders.

The findings from CulturePulse's ARES tool suggest that the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico did not serve as a moment of national unity but rather highlighted and exacerbated existing divisions. The pronounced lack of empathy, as indicated by the decrease in warmth and sadness, coupled with the surge in anger, paints a picture of a society where political violence is increasingly normalized and emotional responses are deeply divided along ideological lines.

This has profound implications for social cohesion in Slovakia. The inability of a national tragedy to elicit a unified emotional response suggests that the country is at a critical juncture, where continued polarization could lead to further political instability and potentially more frequent occurrences of political violence. The media's role in shaping and reflecting these sentiments is crucial, as it both mirrors and influences public perception. This is not to say that the behavior of politicians themselves did not contribute to polarization—it did, and to a large extent—it is just not the focus of this study.

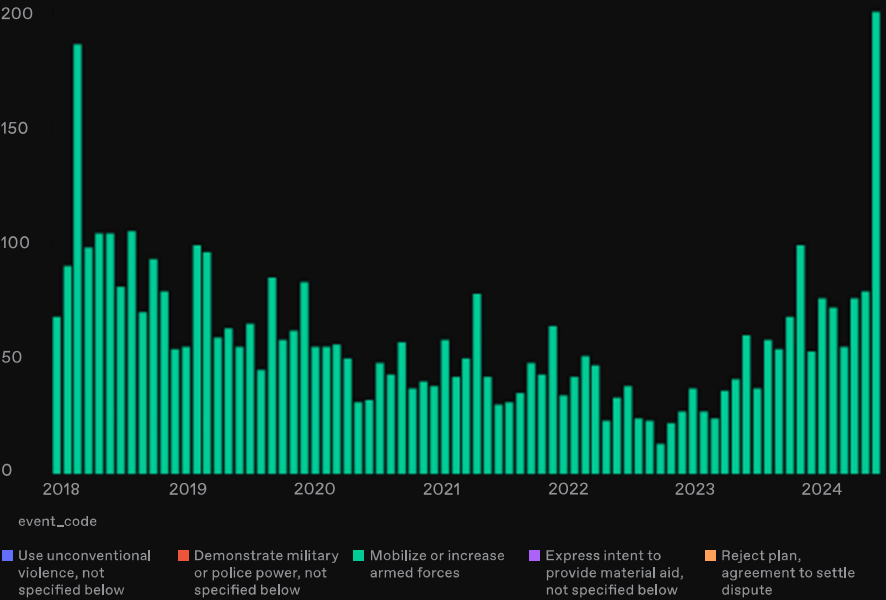


Figure 4 Moves toward Conflict Event Codes over Time in Slovakia

To address these challenges, there is an urgent need for initiatives aimed at reducing polarization and fostering a more empathetic public discourse. This could include media literacy programs that help the public critically assess the emotional framing of news, as well as efforts to promote dialogue across political and ideological divides. Without such interventions, the patterns observed in the aftermath of the Fico assassination attempt could set a dangerous precedent for how Slovak society handles future crises.

#### Who 'owns' the assassin?

In the aftermath of the recent assassination attempt of the Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico, there was a clash between two opposing narratives found in media, and especially on social networks. On the one side were those who argued that the assassin was a frustrated radicalized liberal progressive. On the other side were those claiming he was a far-right xenophobic nationalist. This polarized attempt to force ideological opponents to 'own' the assassin produced confusion in the debates among journalists, politicians, and members of the public alike.

This 'blame game' appeared to be largely driven by ideological biases rather than factual analyses, which intensified polarization (see Section 1) and rendered crisis management more difficult. The reality is that the would-be assassin's beliefs were complex and evolved over time.

The radical liberal progressive narrative was supported by several factors. Comments on platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, as well as web-based alternative media outlets such as "Hlavné správy," "E-report," and "Info Vojna"<sup>6</sup> have spread this narrative. They claimed that Cintula's act was politically motivated by opposition parties,<sup>7</sup> specifically connected<sup>8</sup> to the Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, or linked to the George Soros network. Similarly, some foreign alternative media sources such as Austrian AUF 1<sup>9</sup> were spreading this narrative. Moreover, Cintula was a member of the literary club "Rainbow" (Sk. *Dúha*) and some mistakenly believed the organization to be associated with the LGBT community. Some politicians and media<sup>10</sup> suggested that the assassination attempt was linked

6 "VIDEO: Atentát na Roberta Fica - Kam kráčaš Slovensko? (Debata v rádiu InfoVojna s Andrejom Dankom, Ľubošom Blahom & Erikom Kaliňákom o rozdelenej spoločnosti, ktorej sfanatizovaná časť, hecovaná progresívno-liberálnou opozíciou, ideologickými úderkami v systémových médiách, mimovládami, zradikalizovanými politickými aktivistami & umelcami, je schopná kvôli nesúhlasu s inými názormi a inými politikmi aj vraždiť)." (2024, May 18). Infovojna. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://www.infovojna.bz/article/video-atentat-na-roberta-fica-kam-kracas-slovensko-debata-v-radiu-infovojna-s-andrej-om-dankom-lubosom-blahom-a-erikom-kalinakom>

7 Kluvanec, M. (2024, May 15). "Chystá sa štátny prevrat? Ľudské hyeny hodujú na zranenom Ficovi." Hlavné správy. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from [https://www.hlavnespravky.sk/chysta-sa-statny-prevrat-ludske-hyeny-hoduju-na-zranenom-ficovi/3493202#google\\_vignette](https://www.hlavnespravky.sk/chysta-sa-statny-prevrat-ludske-hyeny-hoduju-na-zranenom-ficovi/3493202#google_vignette)

8 Krupa, L. (2024, May 15). "Harabin: Za atentát na premiéra Fica môžu tí, ktorí štvi spoločnosť proti vláde!" Ereport. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://ereport.sk/harabin-za-atentat-na-premiera-fica-mozu-ti-ktori-stvu-spolocnost-proti-vlade/>

9 Nachrichten AUF1. (2024, May 16). Nachrichten AUF1 vom 16. Mai 2024. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://auf1.tv/nachrichten-auf1/nachrichten-auf1-vom-16-mai-2024>

10 Slovák, P. (2024, May 15). "VIDEO Blaha: Progresivci, opozícia, liberálne médiá, to kvôli vám dnes Robert Fico bojuje o život." Ereport. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://ereport.sk/blaha-progresivci-opozicia-liberalne-media-kvoli-vam-dnes-fico-bojuje-o-zivot/>



to his support of ideas shared by the opposition and the media, which were very critical of the current government. This fuelled the narrative that the assassin was an opposition voter, most probably a liberal progressive. The support came from claims that Cintula attended protests organized by the opposition. Some sources also shared a photo of Cintula with journalist Martin M. Šimečka, father of the leader of the Progressive Slovakia (PS) political party Michal Šimečka. The photo was from an event where Cintula introduced his new book. According to the fact-checking platform Demagog.sk,<sup>11</sup> the image did not actually involve Martin Šimečka. Another theory that was spreading<sup>12</sup> on social networks was that the assassination attempt was due to PS propaganda because similar targets of hatred were seen in the status of a former-student of the C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School in Bratislava, whose former-director is Dušan Jaura. Since Dušan Jaura is the husband of the vice president of PS, Zora Jaurová, this fed the theory.

On the other hand, the far-right, anti-Roma nationalist narrative appealed to several other factors. Cintula wrote a book named “Efata: About Gypsies and Roma” (Sk. *Efata: O Cigánoch a Rómoch*) in 2015 which contained derogatory remarks about the Roma community. Moreover, in one of his books,<sup>13</sup> he mentions the actions of racially motivated murderers<sup>14</sup> who targeted Roma people such as Lubomír Harman, who killed his neighbors in a housing estate in Devínská Nová Ves and then shot bystanders, and Milana Juhász,<sup>15</sup> who committed similar murder in Hurbanov. Cintula writes: “According to an unofficial sociological study from 2002, every twenty-third of us is a potential Juhász, every thirty-third a Harman; the danger of acting sparks in tension is alive, because what we all experience is unfair. The organic growth of the parasitic layer must be stopped.” Secondly, there were several visual proofs<sup>16</sup> of his past interactions with the controversial paramilitary group ‘Slovenskí branci’. He was also a member of the Slovak Writer's Association (Sk. *Spolok slovenských spisovateľov*), which has a reputation of being a home institution of many nationalistically-minded writers. Indeed, it has released a statement<sup>17</sup> after the assassination attempt

claiming that “in this context, all liberal media are accomplices and culprits who indirectly incite citizens ...”. A member of the board of the Association,<sup>18</sup> who is also a member of the Slovak Parliament representing the Slovak National Party (SNS), Roman Michelko,<sup>19</sup> has been involved in proposing several legal acts in this election period that critics see as aiming to restrict media freedom and culture in Slovakia. SNS argues that they are balancing extensive liberal bias in these institutions. The Association has publicly supported these initiatives.<sup>20</sup>

Both interpretations selectively use facts to support their arguments, ignoring the complexities of Cintula's beliefs and actions. His activities were eclectic and sometimes contradictory. In his book, he praised the Roma intelligentsia and Roma women on several occasions, despite his derogatory remarks. He admired activities of a controversial paramilitary group yet founded the ‘Movement Against Violence’. He attended opposition protests but criticized some opposition leaders. Such contradictions make it clear that simple categorizations are inadequate. However, the flood of information on social media, combined with the pre-existing polarized political climate in Slovakia, led to quick and often biased conclusions. The public had a strong demand for explanations in the first days after the attack, but were left with very little information from the government and hence looked for answers elsewhere.

From the accessible sources, it stands to reason that Cintula's act was politically motivated. In the hours after the assassination attempt, a video<sup>21</sup> started to circulate on social media where Cintula criticized the government's policies. In the video, which seems to be filmed in the hallway of a police station, he says: “I do not agree with the government's policy. They eliminated the mass media, why is RTVS being attacked, why is Mazák (note: former chairman of the Judicial Council) fired from his position?” This interpretation aligns with the court judgment that was made available to the media.<sup>22</sup> In it, Cintula cites additional reasons, including the government's legal proposals impacting public service media and culture in Slovakia.

11 Valik, P. (2024, May 16). “Martin Milan Šimečka nie je na fotografii spolu so strelcom, ktorý útočil na premiéra Fica.” DEMAGOG – Factcheck politických diskusií, Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://demagog.sk/martin-milan-simecka-nie-je-na-fotografii-spolu-so-strelcom-na-premiera-fica>

12 Rafaj, R. (2024, May 16). “Podhubie atentátu: Má potenciál sklznúť kultúrna vojna progresivcov do občianskej vojny?” cz24news. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://cz24.news/podhubie-atentatu-ma-potencial-sklznut-kulturna-vojna-progresivcov-do-obcianskej-vojny/>

13 Zdút, M., & Tomková, Š. (2024, May 21). “Listovanie v knihe atentátnika: o masových vrahoch písal s pochopením, očakával úspech.” Denník N, Retrieved July 15, 2024, from [https://dennikn.sk/4004881/listovanie-v-knihe-atentatnika-o-masovych-vrahoch-pisal-s-pochopenim-ocakaval-uspech/?preview\\_id=4004881&preview\\_nonce=9d27634632&preview=true](https://dennikn.sk/4004881/listovanie-v-knihe-atentatnika-o-masovych-vrahoch-pisal-s-pochopenim-ocakaval-uspech/?preview_id=4004881&preview_nonce=9d27634632&preview=true)

14 “O čom písal atentátnik: Rómov označil za nádor kriminality, zároveň ich velebil. Fica označil výrazom ‘škrabák’.” (2024, May 22). Pravda. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/711013-utocnik-na-fica-podla-dennika-n-v-knihe-vyjadril-pochopenie-pre-inych-strelcov/>

15 Tódová, M. (2024, June 15). “Vrah z Hurbanova je doma hrdina. Bol nepriateľný, no majetok prepísať vedel.” Denník N. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://dennikn.sk/158553/vrah-z-hurbanova-je-doma-hrdina-bol-nepriecetny-no-majetok-prepisat-vedel/?ref=inc>

16 Panyí, S.'s X profile. Post from 15<sup>th</sup> May 2024. Available at: <https://x.com/panyiszabolcs/status/1790789652078526939> [Accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2024].

17 <https://www.spolok-slovenskych-spisovatelov.sk/> [Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2024].

18 <https://www.spolok-slovenskych-spisovatelov.sk/products/michelko-roman/> [Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2024].

19 “Poslanec za SNS Michelko avizuje zmeny pri návrhu novely zákona o FPU.” (2024, April 27). Aktuality. Source: TASR. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/Vr2iNWh/poslanec-za-sns-michelko-avizuje-zmeny-pri-navrhu-novely-zakona-o-fpu/>

20 “Výzva za pluralitu názorov – na podporu iniciatívy MK SR novelizovať zákon č. 284/2014 Z. z. o Fonde na podporu umenia.” (n.d.). Retrieved August 10, 2024, from <https://www.spolok-slovenskych-spisovatelov.sk/vyzva-novelizacia-zakona-o-fpu/>

21 Mogilevskaia, A. (2024, May 15). VIDEO: “Prvé slová strelca na Fica. Podozrivý z atentátu vysvetľuje, prečo stlačil spúšť.” Pravda. Retrieved May 16, 2024, from <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/710219-video-ake-mal-motivy-strelec-na-fica-podozrivy-z-atentatu-po-zadrzani-hovori-o-likvidacii-rtvs/>

22 Průšová, V., & Zdút, M. (2024, May 23). “Výpoveď atentátnika: Útok na premiéra mal premyslený, do Handlovej prišiel s pripravenou zbraňou.” Denník N. Retrieved May 24, 2024, from <https://dennikn.sk/4009159/strelec-na-premiera-mal-svoj-utok-premysleny-do-handlovej-prišiel-s-pripravenou-zbranou/>

Cintula also considered himself to be a pacifist, which fits his activities at the time. He founded the ‘Movement Against Violence’, expressing concerns about violence, extremism, and ineffective government responses. The Facebook page of the ‘Movement Against Violence’<sup>23</sup> described itself in May 2016 as a new political party: “The Movement Against Violence is an emerging political party whose goal is to prevent the spread of violence in society. To prevent war in Europe and the spread of hatred.” On the other hand, in one of his books Cintula describes himself in the introduction as: “He was coming into conflict with state power, he was on the list of inconvenient people. Everywhere he went, he rebelled, and because he was alone, he burned like a torch. He has a social conscience, he is dangerous to those who are dangerous. He is married, has two children, but has not been a good father (he has not seen trees for the forest), and lives and works in Levice.” (Leidenfrost, 2024).

As noted above, we know that Cintulas' association with the literary club ‘Dúha’ was misinterpreted. Similarly, from the available information it is most likely that his interactions with the paramilitary group ‘Slovenskí Branci’ were motivated by his admiration for their civic participation and patriotism. He did not approve of their training to use organized force. Similarly, the derogatory claims about the Roma minority do not automatically mean Cintula is part of the far right, as this sentiment is relatively wide-spread among the general public in Slovakia. As one of the experts on the far-right—Tomáš Nociar—explained<sup>24</sup>, xenophobia does not equal extreme far right. If it did, then the extreme far right would be one of the strongest political forces in Slovakia as well as in many other countries. Czech expert on extremism and terrorism Miroslav Mareš, the guarantor of the expert witness programme exams on extremism at the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic, responds in the same vein: When asked if Cintula has a clear ideological profile, he responded that Cintula was ideologically eclectic, “[...] his views varied a lot and were very diffuse.”<sup>25</sup>

In conclusion, both prevailing narratives about Juraj Cintula were oversimplified and inaccurate. His beliefs overlapped and developed over time. To understand Cintula and the incident, a more nuanced view is needed. We will have to wait a while for a definitive answer as law enforcement and forensic psychologists piece the whole picture together. That may take months, if the case of the shooter at the Charles University in Prague from December 2023 is any indication.

23 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/p/Hnutie-Proti-n%C3%A1siliu-100069320975007/> [Accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2024].

24 Osvaldová, L. (2024, May 18). Interview with Nociar, T. “Odborník na krajnú pravicu Nociar: Atentátnika z Handlovej nemožno ideologicky zaškatuľkovať, je ako Dr. Jekyll a Mr. Hyde.” *Denník N*. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://dennikn.sk/3999495/odbornik-na-krajnu-pravicu-nociar-atentatnika-z-handlovej-nemozno-ideologicky-zaskatulkovat-je-ako-dr-jekyll-a-mr-hyde/>

25 Kekelák, D. (2024, May 20). Interview with Mareš, M. “Odborník na extrémizmus: Juraj C. mal mesianistický komplex. Cítil sa ako záchrana demokracie, ide však o dôchodcovský terorizmus.” *Konzervatívny denník Postoj*. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://www.postoj.sk/156011/juraja-c-mal-mesianisticky-komplex-cital-sa-ako-zachranca-demokracie-ide-vsak-o-dochodcovsky-terorizmus>.

## Conclusion

Section 1 discussed the high and growing societal polarization in Slovakia. It has increased under almost all governments, so this is not a phenomenon driven by just one political party or just one side of the political spectrum, though the 2019–2023 period has seen the steepest and steadiest growth. The same problem is experienced by our neighbors Hungary and Poland, which, together with Slovakia, are the most polarized countries in Europe. However, our neighbors in the Czech Republic do not have the same problem. It is thus not possible to simply attribute the growth of polarization to global factors such as side-effects of modern technologies or changes in lifestyle; any nuanced analysis will have to be country specific. The roots of polarization in Slovakia are manifold, ranging from long-term problems with eroded social cohesion or fragmented collective identity caused by Slovakia's complicated history and the side effects of democratic transformation to inefficient government, corruption and a fragmented political elite, whose public manners and rhetoric have grown less civil over the years.

This behavior contributed to the tense atmosphere and to the fact that the dominant public sentiments in May 2024 were anxiety, followed by anger, as described in section 2. What differed from the other attacks in the region is that typically, attacks that hurt or kill people bring the emotions of sadness and warmth into the forefront, while the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister did not. This suggests that even those who supported the policies of the government, same as those who condemned the attack out of principle had difficulty feeling empathy for the victim. The figures in this chapter illustrate the impact of the high polarization in Slovakia, and how it has increased in apparent response to key collapses of institutional trust and increased continually ahead of the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister.

Finally, Section 3 examined the spread of simplified narratives about Juraj Cintula, especially the attempts to describe him as a champion of a specific ideological group, as a militant xenophobic nationalist by some, and as a radicalized progressive tied to the opposition parties by others. Both of these narratives involve simplifications and derogatory labeling, feeding the cycle of polarization as a result. In reality, Cintula's beliefs have been eclectic, mixing different political and philosophical beliefs, which developed over time.

In light of these findings, it is clear that Slovakia stands at a critical juncture. The deepening polarization and the intensification of negative public sentiment, as demonstrated by the assassination attempt and its aftermath, underscore the urgent need for deliberate and thoughtful action. A key aspect of addressing this polarization will be a deeper understanding of the battle lines that divide Slovak society, particularly the urban-rural (or elite/blue-collar) divide. This division often manifests in divergent political loyalties, differing levels of access to information, and varying socioeconomic conditions, all of which contribute to the broader patterns of polarization. By recognizing and addressing these specific fault lines, Slovakia can begin to bridge the gaps that have fragmented its social fabric.

While the challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. Slovakia's history of overcoming adversity, coupled with the resilience of its people, provides a foundation upon which to build a more cohesive society. By fostering open dialogue, promoting media literacy, and encouraging political civility, there is potential to reverse the trends of polarization and restore a sense of national and civil unity. As Slovakia navigates these turbulent times, the path forward must be guided by a commitment to understanding and bridging divides, ensuring that the future is shaped by collaboration rather than conflict. With concerted efforts from all sectors of society, Slovakia can emerge from this period of tension as a more united and resilient nation.

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