

Parties and Linkages in the Slovak Party System: An Overview

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Abstract: *This study acknowledges Kitschelt's inspiration by understanding party linkage as a mechanism closely pertaining to the relationships of accountability and responsiveness between political parties and voters. Three key linkages – programmatic, charismatic and clientelistic – are scrutinized. The authors identify the “linkage profiles” of relevant political parties in the history of Slovak party competition and use the results of an experts' survey (from the DALP project) as a (limited) test of the authors' expert judgement. The study then reflects on the latest developments in political linkages in a period when anti-establishment and anti-system political parties are gaining strength. The paper concludes that clientelism as a linkage played a significantly smaller role than predicted in the 1990s, while charisma – even though we define it differently from some mainstream approaches – manifested a stronger than expected influence on party competition. Also, combinations of charismatic and programmatic linkages seem to be attractive for a number of relevant Slovak parties. Finally, programmatic competition informed Slovak politics for longer and more successfully than Kitschelt's model would suggest.*

Keywords: *linkages, party competition, Kitschelt, Slovakia.*

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Introduction: parties and linkages – parties as linkages

The notion that political parties create or mediate a connection between various parts of the political system – primarily the people and the state – has been present in the party literature in some form for a long time. In particular most of the “party functions” identified in accounts of the normative approach to political parties refer to this linking capacity. Yet although the term linkage has been used in relation to political parties for a considerable time, it has been used in a rather subjective way and without a generally agreed definition.

In the 1980s Kay Lawson popularized the notion of the party as a linkage between citizens and the state (Lawson 1980). Her approach was inductive in nature, stemming from observation of what political parties do within the political system. She originally identified four linkages: participatory, responsive, clientelistic and coercive. Later, after editing her five-volume book on political parties, which had a global scope, she added two more linkages – revolutionary and market (Lawson 2010). Lawson considered linkage as “the key function ascribed to parties: linking citizens to the state... Parties can connect the public with government by serving as agencies for citizen participation, by providing avenues for the representation of citizens’ views, by returning favours for votes or by manipulating and controlling constituents. (In this model, parties play linkage roles even in non-competitive and coercive political systems.)” (Lawson – Poguntke 2004: 254). Over time Lawson developed the notion of linkage as an interactive process and as a mechanism created by various intermediaries or “agencies of connection” (Lawson – Merkl 1988: 14). For Lawson “the political party is the one agency that can claim to have as its very *raison d’être* the creation of an entire linkage chain, a chain of connections that runs from the voters through the candidates and the electoral process to the officials of government” (Lawson – Merkl 1988: 16).

While her work on parties as linkages attracted some attention, it would be an exaggeration to say it reshaped the field of party research. Part of the reason was that while “linkage” managed to establish itself as a term in party literature, it has never been a clearly defined concept. Those who adopted the term after Lawson continued to use it in a rather fuzzy way. Their approach, like Lawson’s, has largely been a variation on the theme of party functions, which had been present in the literature since the 1950s.²

To give an example, relatively recently R. J. Dalton, D. M. Farrell and I. McAllister (2011) used data from the Comparative Study of Electoral System

2 The party functions approach refers to a normative notion of the role of parties in democracy based on a set of functions parties are supposed to exercise in a party system. The appropriate and successful execution of these functions constitutes parties’ desirable (normative) contribution to democracy on the national level (Sartori 2005). Along with the “responsible party model” (APSA 1950) and the party government model (Katz 1987), the party functions approach constitutes the essence of the normative package through which party theory has been approached for several decades since the 1950s.

(CSES) to conceptualize the notion of party government differently, looking at the (roughly chronological) chain of linkages that political parties create within the electoral process and consequently in the process of governing (see Figure 1.1 in Dalton *et al.* 2011: 7). They state that their approach “is based on the party government model of democracy, in which political parties provide a linkage between citizens, government, and policy outputs. Such a reliance on parties is widely seen as the key in ensuring representative democracy really represents and is really democratic” (Dalton *et al.* 2011: viii). They acknowledged that they have been inspired by Lawson who “[i]nstead of talking about functions... uses the term “linkage” to distinguish political parties from other organizations, marking them as the primary representative agents between citizens and the state. As she puts it, this is why linkage is often used as a synonym for representation” (Dalton *et al.* 2011: 6).

Dalton *et al.* identified five main forms of linkage between parties and voters, namely:

- **Campaign linkage:** parties recruit candidates and set the parameters of the electoral process;
- **Participatory linkage:** parties activate citizens during elections and mobilize them to vote;
- **Ideological linkage:** parties inform voters about policy choices in elections and voters strongly base their voting preference on these policy alternatives;
- **Representative linkage:** elections achieve a good congruence between citizen policy preferences and the policies of the parties represented in parliament and the government; and
- **Policy linkage:** parties deliver on the policies they advocated in the election (Dalton *et al.* 2011: 6–7).

Strong connections between the linkages are seen as advantageous: “When there is a strong connection between each of these linkages in the chain of party government, then representative government can function well as a means to connect citizens’ preferences to the outcomes of the government. But when one or more of these linkages deteriorates, the model of party government suffers” (Dalton *et al.* 2011: 7). While the authors characterized Lawson’s approach as “[i]n practical terms... very similar to the functional roles in other party government theories” (Dalton *et al.* 2011: 6), their own list is even closer to any of the classic lists of “party functions” than Lawson’s was. So, their reconceptualization of party government in terms of linkage may be somewhat less interesting than the authors suggest. While descriptively refreshing, their approach was hardly novel in the research on party government. Other authors, such as Katz (1990) or Poguntke (2002), employed the term linkage in relation to political parties but they were basing the capacity

of parties to create linkages within the political system primarily on their internal organizational capacities.

The early 1990s witnessed the emergence of political pluralism in the former Communist countries of East Central Europe and post-Soviet Eurasia. This development presented researchers with an opportunity for testing some Western-centric assumptions about the emergence of democratic party competition. One such key assumption was a normative preference for programmatic competition as a pre-requisite for the healthy development of new democracies. This was largely the consequence of transposing the “responsible party model” paradigm to the situation of early post-communist pluralism. In terms of linkages, it meant that the normatively desirable dominance of the so-called programmatic linkage was seen as the best way for parties to contribute to building democracy at the national level. Herbert Kitschelt’s work (Kitschelt, 2000; Kitschelt *et al.* 1999) challenged this assumption by suggesting that the existence of other linkage mechanisms related to political parties was not only a matter of fact but that they also had the potential to play a role in establishing meaningful relationships within the party system. This is particularly true when linkage is understood in terms of accountability and responsiveness.

In Kitschelt’s approach, most of the previous thinking on parties as linkages falls under what is typically called the programmatic linkage, namely the expectation that “linkages of accountability and responsiveness between voters and political elites work through politicians’ programmatic appeals and policy achievements” (Kitschelt 2000: 845). He considered this kind of emphasis an incomplete analysis, and using the example of post-communist party systems, among others, he argued that politicians (as people with charisma) and networks for the direct exchange of material advantages between parties and individuals (clientelism) should also be considered relevant linkage mechanisms between parties and voters.

The notable advantage of Kitschelt’s approach is that, unlike most of the previously mentioned approaches, it is not a semi-direct derivative of the party functions approach. In providing a conceptualization of its own, Kitschelt draws on Aldrich’s ideas about problem solving by political parties (Aldrich 1995), looking at their focus on, and investment in, solving the problems of collective action and social choice (Kitschelt 2000: 847–848). Based on the emphasis parties put on these two elements of problem solving, Kitschelt constructs a typology which results in three types of linkage. According to Kitschelt, this is a result which cannot be applied in democratic conditions.

In this account, the dominance of charismatic linkage is accompanied by a lack of investment both in parties’ organizational capacity and in mechanisms for building some kind of policy consensus. (Kitschelt considers the situation where parties invest only in interest aggregation but not in administrative capacity to be typical for competitive oligarchies, so he omits it from his analysis

Table 1: Ideal types of linkage mechanisms by political parties

Investment	Challenge		Linkage
	<i>Collective Action</i> (e.g. organizational structure)	<i>Social Choice</i> (e.g. interest aggregation)	
	NO	NO	Charismatic
	NO	YES	na*
	YES	NO	Clientelistic
	YES	YES	Programmatic

Note: *It does not occur in democracies.

Source: Adapted from Kitschelt 2000: 249-253.

of democracies.) Similarly, if a party invests primarily in its organizational capacity and not in interest aggregation mechanisms, the clientelistic linkage will be dominant. Lastly, the programmatic linkage can flourish in situations where parties prioritize both their collective action capacity as well as their social choice potential. In such cases “the constitutive element of programmatic political linkage is that parties solve their problems of social choice through the development of policy packages that make it possible to map issues onto underlying simple competitive dimensions” (Kitschelt 2000: 850).

An indispensable part of the model is the observation that these ideal types never completely exhaust the characteristics of individual parties. Indeed, in practice parties try to combine more appeals and linkages whenever they see it fit. Their combinability is influenced by a variety of factors, but what is important is that it is not possible to maximize all three linkage mechanisms at the same time. At a certain point they clash, and some kind of trade off becomes necessary: “The incompatibilities between charismatic, clientelist, and programmatic linkages are not absolute. At low dosages, all linkage mechanisms may be compatible. As politicians intensify their cultivation of a particular type of linkage, however, they reach a production possibility frontier at which further intensifications of one linkage mechanism can occur only at the expense of toning down other linkage mechanisms” (Kitschelt 2000: 855).

Purpose and objective of the analysis

This text acknowledges the “Kitscheltian” inspiration insofar as it understands party linkage – or “party as a linkage” – as a mechanism intimately connected to the relationships of accountability and responsiveness between political parties and voters. In other words, *we see party linkages as the proposals from the parties towards voters, as to what should be the basis on which voters consider the parties’ appeal prior to elections and evaluate their record in government retrospectively.* Our

own research and experience suggest that Kitschelt's claim about the relevance of alternative linkages (charismatic and clientelistic) is valid in the analysis of politics in the post-communist region in general and in Slovakia in particular.

The reasoning about party competition described above was applied in a comparative analysis of four post-communist countries by Kitschelt, Mansfeldová, Markowski and Tóka in the second half of the 1990s (Kitschelt et al. 1999). This work represented an important milestone in the analysis of post-communist party politics. The essence of the conclusion reached by Kitschelt and his collaborators was that "the extent to which party competition in Eastern European countries is programmatically structured (rather than based on clientelism or around leaders' charismatic features) should vary according to legacies of pre-communist and communist rule." (Wineroither – Seeber 2018) The prevalence of programmatic party competition in party platforms that are largely socio-economic, accompanied by the adoption of a programmatic linkage by the parties, presents a considerably better prospect for democratic consolidation in general and party system stability in particular.

Even though Slovakia was not an object of analysis in the book, the idea that there is a connection between the type of competition as expressed in linkages used by parties to make connections to their base and the legacy of the type of the communist regime previously present in the country generated certain expectations about Slovakia as well. If we accept the analytic power of their typology, the consequence is that in the case of Slovakia, which was gaining its democratic experience under a mixed legacy of national-accommodative and patrimonial Communism, we should expect the clientelistic linkage to have quite a strong presence in the country's party system (Kitschelt et al. 1999: 39). The prospect for programmatic linkage would therefore most likely be weak, complemented or overshadowed by a strong clientelist one. Consequently, democratic consolidation and party system stability could be harder to achieve than in countries with less unfavourable legacies from the Communist period. Inspired by Kitschelt's approach, we want to confront the (indirect) predictions stemming from his analysis regarding the prospects for programmatic competition in Slovakia. With the benefit of two decades of hindsight, we want to compare what would have been predicted with the actual development of party competition in the country.

In order to achieve this objective, we firstly provide an overview of the development of party competition in Slovakia since 1989, which in a very general way summarizes earlier studies and empirical surveys over the last three decades. We focus on party linkage strategies as specified in the introduction to this article. It reflects on the latest developments of political linkages at a time when there is a rise in anti-establishment and anti-system political parties which base their appeals on charisma rather than programmes – thus challenging and undermining programmatic linkage, which has been assumed to be a precondition for

democratic consolidation. Secondly, we propose our own set of “linkage profiles” for relevant political parties in the history of Slovak party competition. Finally, referring to more recent work in the Kitscheltian tradition, that of Wineroither and Seeber (2018), we check whether the results of their linkage-based typology of parties matches the Slovak situation during the three decades of democratic development. We do this by considering the results of the unique Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP 2008–2009) database. We focus on country specific outcomes for Slovakia and confront them with the generalizations for Central European political parties made by Wineroither and Seeber on the basis of the same dataset.

The linkage-based account of party competition in Slovakia

In this section we provide a roughly chronological account of the development of Slovak party politics, focusing on the linkage strategies of the relevant parties and the way they shaped party competition.

Shaping the state with charisma and clientelism in the 1990s

In the early and mid-1990s, party competition was defined by the remarkable charismatic appeal of Vladimír Mečiar, who was three times prime minister between 1990 and 1998, as well as by the operation of his powerful clientelistic network. We can hypothesize that the increasing authoritarianism of this period motivated some in the opposition to consider programmatic appeals as a useful way of both countering Mečiar’s politics and distancing themselves from them, not least as a means of identifying with the Western ways of doing politics. We can see this in the formation of the opposition coalition and later electoral party Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) in 1997. However, all this was happening in the context of an all-consuming battle to define the parameters of the emergent Slovak statehood. The established cliché describes Mečiar’s Slovakia as a ‘fight over the rules of the game’.

In 1998, fear of the regime’s growing authoritarianism and its consequences for the prospect of the EU membership helped to topple Mečiar’s illiberal coalition. A tentative programmatic emphasis characterized the three actors of the new winning coalition: SDK; the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH); and the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ). The remaining partner, the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), was a new party and a harbinger of the series of challengers to follow. Its appeals were largely moralistic, and it shied away from mention of public policy measures.³

3 For the characteristics of this first generation of challengers in the Slovak party system – also termed “self-professed depolarizers” – see Gyárfášová – Učeň (2020a).

While it is far from clear to what extent the programmatic linkage contributed to anti-regime mobilisation, for the new government it became a trademark to be successfully sold to their international partners in the process of the EU accession.

Programmatic competition in full swing

In 1999 and 2000 two important things happened: first, the electoral party SDK turned into a distinct party organization, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS), which in terms of socio-economic policies adopted the stance of a market-liberal modernizer as its emblematic appeal. The programmatic linkage offered to voters had thereby acquired an unwavering champion. Second, a new challenger party was created around former SDE functionary Robert Fico and some new cadres from the broader challenger, anti-establishment milieu. Fico's Direction (Smer) party was originally created as an anti-establishment challenger criticizing both the "old ways" of Mečiar as well as the "new ways" of the anti-Mečiar coalition in power.

Smer in its early stages, like SOP before, formulated its appeals in moralistic rather than public policy terms. It took failure in the 2002 elections to motivate Smer first to openly move to the socio-economically left side of the political spectrum, and second to accept the rules of the game set by SDKÚ-DS. The party soon changed its name to Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) and started to present itself, depending on the context, as a social, socialist or social democratic alternative to the neoliberal governance represented by SDKÚ-DS. As a consequence, the period 2002 – 2006 was the heyday of the programmatic offer (linkage) in Slovak politics, with this dimension of competition supported by the joint efforts of the two largest political parties. As we will illustrate later, the DALP findings indicate that programmatic competition continued at least until 2009/2010.

For example, when in 2002 a new challenger, the New Citizen Alliance (ANO), appeared, it also presented itself as the champion of a policy programme – uncompromising market liberalism – which they combined with moralistic criticisms of the "conflictual politics" incited by SDKÚ and Smer-SD. The remaining ruling coalition partners, KDH and the recently united political party of the Hungarian minority, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), also found the emphasis on programmatic competition convenient, particularly for the purpose of assuring EU accession, although their own appeals to their voter base may not necessarily have been programmatic.⁴ ANO was eventually

4 In fact, the combination of programmatic and clientelistic linkage was always quite pronounced in the case of the parties of the Hungarian minority, which included a typically strong emphasis on regional politics and promises of bringing development and investment to the regions with large minority populations.

destroyed by internal frictions as their programmatic image did not coincide with the actual dealings of the party leader, which were blatantly clientelistic.

Analysis of public opinion in this period also suggests that voters largely accepted the dominant programmatic positioning of the main parties along a single dimension which was *de facto* the local equivalent of the Western socio-economic left-right axis. Signs of voters' aligning with the programmatic logic could be observed in the frequent self-classification of Smer-SD supporters as belonging to the lower societal strata (although in 1999 Smer had started as a party of educated urban people). Similarly, supporters of SDKÚ-DS more frequently self-identified as belonging to the higher social classes, which was traditionally a very unusual self-identification in Slovakia (Gyárfášová – Krivý 2013: 282–283). In addition, the 2006 election was the only one in independent Slovakia in which no new party created shortly before the elections succeeded in entering parliament. This can be explained by the dominance of the programmatic competitive dimension: a new party could not compete with Smer-SD and SDKÚ-DS on this dimension, while there were not enough available voters to be gained on any other competitive lines.

The dominance of the programmatic linkage as the most successful way of securing voters and as an accountability mechanism started to weaken slowly around 2005 when both SDKÚ-DS and ANO started to succumb to internal dissent and public resentment about their “loss of integrity” (read: corruption). Also, following the 2006 elections, Smer-SD entered into a new illiberal coalition government with the Slovak National Party (SNS) and Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), which was now in steep decline, having lost many of its voters to Smer-SD. While Smer-SD never abandoned its self-declared social democratic public stance, its appeal changed as the essence of the coalition's politics was the division of spoils and organized elite-level clientelism. While Smer-SD kept its programmatic linkage alive, portraying itself as a social democratic party with the mission of fighting the consequences of the former “anti-people government of the right”, additional elements had been added to its appeal. Incrementally, party leader and prime minister Robert Fico updated his subtle social populism to secure the edge over coalition partners, who on occasion resorted to various forms of social demagoguery (Učien 2011). Nationalist elements were also added to the party appeal. This was due in part to the presence of SNS in the coalition, but it was mainly designed to make its appeal more flexible as Fico felt the appeal of the programmatic linkage had been declining among voters. He was therefore creating scope to enlarge his voter base by supplementing the programmatic linkage with other ways of linking with the electorate. This was a unique situation where we witnessed the combination of all three linkages in the appeal of a pivotal party.

The rise of new challengers and Smer-SD's pretence of programmatic offer

The 2010 elections nevertheless led to the end of the Smer-SD-led coalition. The vote for the former opposition parties – SDKÚ-DS, KDH and the newly created interethnic splinter from SMK, the Bridge party⁵ – was fortified by the emergence of a new challenger party, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS). SaS broke through as the anti-corruption, anti-establishment challenger to the “old ways” of Smer-SD and SDKÚ-DS, yet was non-charismatic and regarded clientelism as an anathema.

The new but short-lived government coalition meant the rejuvenation of a programmatic linkage, similar to that of the 2002–2006 centre-right government, since SaS, while critical of SDKÚ's conduct in power, approved of its emphasis on programmatic competition. Often called “market liberal”, SaS was actually more a “pro-business” party and as such it soon became part of the mainstream in terms of its preference for programmatic linkage in its appeals. However, it has always tended to treat people engaged in private enterprise as the “collective client” of the party. This has specifically informed the party's appeal: election manifestoes have traditionally featured the “business environment” as the common denominator.

Within its strong anti-corruption dimension, SaS in 2010 co-opted four members of the Ordinary People (OL) movement led by Igor Matovič. Following the elections OL became part of the SaS parliamentary caucus, and while they were perfectly compatible regarding their strong anti-corruption stance, differences in the intensity and character of their anti-establishment posture soon became very clear. In 2011 SaS expelled Matovič from the parliamentary caucus for the voting against the government. Following the fall of the government in November 2011, Matovič successfully ran in the 2012 parliamentary elections with his new electoral vehicle, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO).⁶

The essence of OLaNO is a distinct and intensely anti-establishment bearing. Its anti-corruption appeals are of a moralistic nature, in contrast to the more technocratic approach of SaS. While SOP, ANO, Smer-SD and SaS may have been harbingers of an appeal based on the charisma of righteous ideas, OLaNO was the embodiment of such an appeal, expressed in its radical moralistic criticism of the establishment and its conduct. Programmatic linkage was not particularly important for OLaNO, while the clientelistic linkage was an anathema, just as it was for SaS. Also, importantly, OLaNO, has ostensibly

5 The official name of the new interethnic party was Most-Híd. Both words mean “bridge”, in Slovak and Hungarian respectively. We use Bridge as the acronym in this text.

6 For a more detailed treatment of the second generation of challengers – “the champions of integrity” – see Gyárfášová – Učeň (2020a).

been acting as an anti-party, insofar as it presented itself the electoral vehicle for independent candidates – hence the name Ordinary People and Independent Personalities. In fact, OĽaNO does not mind operating as a party when in public office but refuses partisan logic when it comes to the remaining faces of party organization – the party on the ground and at party headquarters. The reason for this is both ideological (the anti-party persuasion is indeed very strong) and pragmatic (they see party organizations as a factor constraining the operation of their political project).

The 2012 snap election ushered in the single-party government of Smer-SD, the decline of its former coalition partners and disunity among the opposition. There was a great degree of distrust among the opposition parties, who traded accusations about who was to blame for the fall of their government in 2011. Also, the established opposition refusal to contemplate governing with Smer-SD started to weaken as both KDH and Bridge were clearly toying with the idea, while SaS and OĽaNO continued to abhor it. In terms of linkages, Smer-SD pushed the notion of “unipolar” programmatic competition, which presented their party as the only source of any meaningful public policy programme and denied any programmatic potential whatsoever among the opposition parties.

The radicalization of challengers, breakdown of old competitive lines and the decline of programmatic competition

Both the trend of opposition disunity regarding cooperation with Smer-SD and the latter’s “defence” of the programmatic linkage vis-à-vis “moralizing” challengers continued during Smer-SD’s single-party government. The opposition split culminated in the aftermath of the 2016 elections when the victorious Smer-SD forged a coalition with the nationalist SNS and the Hungarian minority Bridge party, which finally crossed the coalition-opposition divide. The clientelistic practices of Smer-SD and SNS, which focus on both elite and mass clients, intensified. Bridge, as an ethnic and in part a regional party, had always had a discernible clientelistic element, so they could align with their new partners. Meanwhile, the opposition world was shaken by the failure of KDH to enter parliament, matched by the ascent of the anti-systemic far-right People’s Party Our Slovakia⁷ and the emergence of a new right-wing anti-establishment challenger, We are Family (SR), both of whom succeeded in entering parliament for the first time.

We are Family represented a nominally right-wing and conservative attempt to base party appeal on the charisma of the leader combined with the appeal of a righteous anti-establishment posture. Like OĽaNO four years earlier, the party

7 The party is currently called Kotlebovci – People’s Party Our Slovakia after they added the leader’s surname to the party’s name. “Kotlebovci” means the retinue of Marián Kotleba.

was generically anti-corruption and critical of the misconduct of the elites, but unlike it, the new party presented voters less with the “charisma of righteous ideas” and rather more with the charisma of party leader Boris Kollár, who “was like the people” – in spite of the fact that he was far from the ordinary person when it came to his wealth, media celebrity and highly unconventional private life. In this case, the essence of the charismatic appeal launched at the voter base was Kollár’s willingness to defend the “ordinariness” of the people and to dignify the aspects of their lives which other politicians would likely consider base and ignoble.⁸

Smer-SD’s “unipolar programmatic competition” continued to dominate the government’s discourse after 2016, but there was a notable increase in collective clientelistic appeals and practices, mainly towards the end of the term (2018–2020). These took the form of handouts for specific groups of the electorate, such as pensioners, students or employees, generously financed by the state budget, or rather a deficit in the state budget. These were largely pre-emptive measures aimed at buying the favour of large groups of population in the face of increasing resentment about government corruption and suspected protection of criminal activities of the ruling parties’ cronies. The government, or rather Smer-SD, justified its handouts by claiming it was paying people a premium resulting from the success of the government’s policies.

The murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in February 2018 mobilized society in protest against what was perceived as the governing parties’ complicity in concealing the suspected mastermind behind the murder and encouraging the system of privileges which produced the milieu capable of organizing the murder. The ensuing investigation uncovered alarming facts about the governing parties’ involvement in illicit activities that undermined the work of state institutions such as the police and state prosecutors, as well as high-profile corruption in the judiciary. Pressure on the government intensified as did the frequency and volume of its social handouts. These did not, however, prevent a dramatic decline in the governing parties’ popularity and the return of the opposition to power in 2020. A new ruling coalition was formed by OĽaNO, We are Family, SaS and the new For the People party (ZĽ).

In terms of linkages, the urgency of the fight against corruption and state capture resulted in a further decline in programmatic competition within the party system. Under enormous pressure, Smer-SD divided into two wings. One, led by former PM Peter Pellegrini, felt they were less threatened by investigations into corruption and aimed at further cultivating the programmatic (social-democratic type) appeal to voters. Another wing around another former

8 Along with the far-right ĽSNS, We are Family can be considered a member of the third generation of challengers – “democracy’s cynics” – that have appeared in the Slovak party system. See Gyárfášová and Učeň (2020a).

PM Róbert Fico perceived themselves to be in enormous personal danger from corruption investigations and resorted to radical forms of voter mobilization, including anti-systemic rhetoric and conspiratorial explanations for the developments that had led to the defeat of Smer-SD in 2020 elections. The party finally split in late 2020 and the new party Voice – Social Democracy (HLAS-SD) was created by Pellegrini's wing.

Prior to the February 2020 elections, opposition appeals were also influenced by the increasing vulnerability of Smer-SD and its assumed complicity in undermining the institutions of state. OĽaNO and SR visibly intensified their anti-corruption appeals. OĽaNO in particular was successful in turning this into the defining topic of elections and increased its support fivefold in the four months prior to the elections by means of intense and masterful emotional manipulation of the topic of the governing elite's moral corruption.

Two new, potentially relevant parties contested elections. These were Progressive Slovakia (PS), which ran in coalition with the smaller Together (Spolu) party, and For the People (ZĽ). PS was established by a frustrated progressive and largely urban constituency, which has been feeling unrepresented for some time. ZĽ was formed by former President Andrej Kiska, who was a staunch opponent of prime minister Fico. Both could be characterized as a new kind of challenger, since unlike many of their predecessors they posed a "challenge by moderation".⁹ Although belonging to a new generation of challengers in the Slovak party system, they preserve the strong anti-corruption stance and criticism of the conduct of the ruling elites. However, they did not propose particularly radical counter-measures. Instead, they mostly suggested the remedy of returning to the rules of moderate and consensual policy making. In terms of linkages, their preference may potentially lie in the programmatic area, but they consider "virtuous ideas" (read: anti-corruption) to be the most urgent necessity, and this influenced their appeals prior to the 2020 elections. SaS, in the meantime, has become a quite ordinary mainstream party with a largely programmatic (linkage) profile.

The new HLAS party has so far been rather unclear as to the preferred accountability mechanism to be suggested to their voters, and they manoeuvre around the topic quite a lot. In principle, they would prefer a programmatic linkage and would be willing to assume the role of the leftist contender in the competition of policy programmes, thus replacing their mother party, Smer-SD, in this capacity. As they are not completely immune to the threat of ongoing criminal investigation, their willingness to participate in the "programmatic game" may be determined by the readiness of future partners to guarantee some kind of impunity for them. This kind of assumption is, however, very tentative in

9 A more detailed description of profiles of these parties and their competitive strategies can be found in Gyárfášová and Učeň (2020b).

the current Slovak party system, where the only real achievement the post-2020 government can claim is the fact that they have abandoned political control over the police and prosecutors so that these institutions can now run extensive politically sensitive criminal investigations completely unhindered. Any kind of political guarantees to HLAS, perhaps aimed at securing the prospect of a partnership based on programmatic linkage at some point in the future – would be a betrayal of the government’s legacy.

Moreover, the dominant government party OĽaNO and its reliable tactical partner within the coalition, SR, have no interest in solidifying the programmatic linkage in the party system, as they never relied on it in their relationships with voters in the first place. They rely on charisma as the best way of attracting voters and will continue to do so. Similarly, they will continue to suggest that living up to expectations of morally dignified political conduct by politicians who “are like us” should be the preferred accountability mechanism by which the voters should judge them.

What kind of linkage patterns?

Wineroither and Seeber (2018) see linkages as mechanisms of democratic accountability proposed by parties or politicians to their (targeted) constituencies. We subscribe to a similar view, in which parties choose linkages and suggest them to their supporters as an appropriate form of accountability – thus encouraging voters to keep them accountable on this basis. Such accountability includes both future and retrospective assessment as the basis for electoral choice. As for future voting choices, in some cases the type of linkage suggested by the party may influence electoral choice, especially in cases when the proposed linkage differs from all other parties’ offer and the affected voter group considers it more appropriate for the problems society is facing.

Methodologically, when analysing party politics in terms of party linkages it is necessary to recognize that practically all parties combine more than one linkage in their efforts to approach voters (Kitschelt 2000; Wineroither – Seeber 2018). We therefore rarely observe a party adopting only one linkage in such an exclusive way that it exhausts its “essence”. Related to this, linkages do not constitute party types or, vice versa, *conceptual* party types should not be based on an analysis of the linkages employed by parties. Wineroither and Seeber (2018) identified several *empirical* types of political parties based on their use of linkage mechanisms as a form of democratic accountability, but none of these types was based on the exclusive usage of one specific linkage by the parties involved.

Their linkage-based typology of political parties in Western and Eastern Europe is based on analysis of the exceptional “Dataset of the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project – DALP”, covering the variety of instrumental

and emotional modes of linkage building (Kitschelt et al. 2009). DALP data are based on expert surveys of 15–50 jury members per country covering the period 2008–2009. As stated in its mission statement, “DALP data make it possible to study not just individual linkage strategies of parties, but the complex ‘profiles’ of linkage efforts that parties deploy in the pursuit of votes and office” (DALP 2008–9). Using these data, Wineroither and Seeber analyse groups of parties according to their West-South-East Europe location combined with the party families to which they belong (Socialist, Social Democrat, Christian Democratic, Liberal, Greens etc.) The DALP database is organized according to individual countries so we could identify how Slovak parties were classified according to their linkage building for the period 2008–2009, when the survey was implemented.

The expert evaluation of linkages has been operationalized by following indicators:

1. CHARISMATIC linkage: to what extent do parties seek to mobilize electoral support by featuring a party leader’s charismatic personality?
2. PROGRAMMATIC linkage: to what extent do parties seek to mobilize electoral support by emphasizing the attractiveness of the party’s positions on policy issues?
3. CLIENTELISTIC linkage: to what extent do parties seek to mobilize electoral support by emphasizing the capacity of the party to deliver targeted material benefits to its electoral supporters?
4. PID (Party Identification): to what extent parties drawn on and appeal to voters long-term partisan loyalty (“party identification”). Parties may involve their historical origins or the achievements of historical leaders. They may feature party symbols and rituals to reinvigorate party identification.
5. POLICY COMPETENCE: to what extent parties seek to mobilize electoral support by emphasizing their general competence to govern and bring about or maintain economic, social and political stability (DALP Dataset Codebook 2008–9: 153, Kitschelt et al. 2009: 752).¹⁰

As shown in Table 2, based on multilevel statistical analysis Wineroither and Seeber identify three clusters of political parties in Eastern Europe with typical linkage profiles. The empirical typology clearly shows that there is nothing like a clear programmatic, charismatic or clientelistic type. They argue that in general the model-based analysis results in three clusters, where party identification effort does not account for the distinctiveness of the subgroups. Boundaries are primarily drawn by rankings on programmatic and clientelistic efforts. For

¹⁰ Each of these dimensions has been evaluated on a four-points scale 1= not at all/very little to 4=to a great extent/very strongly.

the Eastern European countries, “members of cluster 1 represent the universal pole and those of cluster 2 the particularistic pole of competitive strategies, cluster 3 takes an intermediate stance on this axis in addition to low scores on valence effort” (Wineroither – Seeber 2018: 15–17).

Table 2: Linkage profiles of empirical party clusters

	Clientelism	Programmaticism	Charisma	PID	Competence to govern
No 1 cluster – East	Low	High	High	Medium	High
No 2 cluster – East	High	Low	High	Medium	High
No 3 cluster – East	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Low

Source: Wineroither-Seeber 2018: 17, adapted by authors.

Table 3 illustrates averages for the six Slovak political parties which were relevant at the time of the data collection (2008–2009).

Table 3: Six Slovak political parties included in the DALP experts’ evaluation (2008-2009)¹¹

	Clientelism	Programmaticism	Charisma	PID	Competence to govern
SDKÚ-DS	2.5	3.6	2.6	2.9	4.0
Smer-SD	2.9	3.2	3.7	2.0	3.7
SMK	2.5	2.9	1.6	3.8	2.5
SNS	2.5	2.8	3.3	3.3	2.3
KDH	2.3	2.7	1.5	3.5	2.8
HZDS	2.8	1.8	3.7	3.6	2.7

Note: Averages on the 4-point scale 1=very little/not at all ...4=very strongly. Higher values (over 3.0) are highlighted.

Source: DALP DATA (https://duke.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eLPbYbmOrnxyOp?Q_JFE=qdg).

For these six political parties we see that the differences in scores for clientelism were very small. Thus in the view of participating experts, all Slovak parties were very similar regarding the employment of the clientelist linkage.

¹¹ These include Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS, led by Vladimír Mečiar), Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ-DS, led by Mikuláš Dzurinda); Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK, led by Béla Bugár), Slovak National Party (SNS, led by Ján Slota), Christian Democratic Movement (KDH, led by Pavol Hrušovský) and Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD, led by Robert Fico). In the years 2008-2009 the nationalist-left leaning government coalition was composed of Smer-SD, SNS and HZDS, while the centre-right parties SDKÚ-DS, KDH and SMK were in opposition.

The populist-nationalists HZDS and SNS were characterized by a strong charismatic linkage and strong appeals to identity (3.7 and 3.3 for charisma and 3.6 and 3.3 for identity). The Party of the Hungarian Coalition and the Christian Democratic Movement demonstrated above-average values on party identification as they appeal to long-term partisan loyalty that is backed by voters' ethnic or religious identity (3.8 and 3.5).

The other two parties – Smer-SD and SDKÚ-DS – best represent the programmatic linkage, but we see significant differences between them in other respects. Whereas SDKÚ-DS combined strong programmatic (3.6) and competence appeals (4.0), Smer-SD was seen as uniting charisma (3.7) with a slightly lower, but still comparatively strong, programmatic one (3.2), supported by competence to govern (3.7). This combination was the main reason for the party's long-term viability and dominance in the party system. As discussed in our analysis of this period in the next section, these scores underline the fact that Smer-SD was seen – and presented itself – as a competent party with a charismatic leader, backed by clientelist mechanisms. It was precisely in this period that Smer-SD attempted to “maximize” all three linkage mechanisms at the same time.

Comparing the Slovak political parties with Wineroither's and Seeber's empirical clusters in Table 2, we see that programmatic and charismatic linkages tend to occur together. The high level of PID in the cases of SMK, SNS, KDH and HZDS refers to identity politics, which used to be typical for Slovak political parties.

The strong programmatic linkage characteristics attributed to SDKÚ-DS and Smer-SD by DALP data are in agreement with our expert judgement on linkage profiles of Slovak parties during the three decades of democracy. (As DALP covers only two years of that period, it provides a limited check of the accuracy of our reasoning.) It certainly confirms our thesis that the 2000s were the heyday of programmatic competition, fostered by exactly these two parties. As for other parties and other periods of party system development, our analysis generally concurs with Wineroither and Seeber's (2018) conclusion that “[P]arties in the East had initially been characterized by low programmatic identity before they would gradually start to crystallize around an emergent socioeconomic structure of competition, a process that was supposed to have created additional leverage for leadership-based campaigning” (Wineroither – Seeber 2018: 2). Our analysis described some of the reasons behind these developments.

Capitalizing on the account above and the conceptualizations mentioned in the introduction, a list of linkage mechanisms employed in Slovak party politics can be offered with the following linkage profiles:

1. **Programmatic – committed:** This describes the situation when political parties primarily rely on programmatic linkage as the appeal to attract and retain a sizeable voter base. This was mainly the case of **SDKÚ-DS** and **Smer-SD**, but also **SaS** after 2016.

2. **Programmatic – pragmatic:** This characteristic applies to those parties which for certain reasons found it useful to present their programmes as their primary appeal but combined it with identity appeals. This was mostly the case of **KDH** and the **Hungarian** ethnic parties, which for most of the time may have preferred the programmatic image in addition to their appeal to Christian and ethnic identities respectively. The reason for this might have been the normative influence of the West in the political competition of late 1990s based on arguments according to which charisma and clientelism were perceived as inferior (populist) or even morally reprehensible “ways of doing politics”.
3. **Clientelistic:** In contrast with “Kitscheltian” expectations, clientelism played a much smaller role as a party linkage mechanism than foretold in his 1999 book. While clientelism as a governing practice was widespread, and all parties engaged in it, clientelism as an appeal and linkage with voters was mostly hidden and more or less subtly articulated in the case of collective clients such as ethnic groups – Slovaks in case of **HZDS** and **SNS** and Hungarians in the case of **SMK**.
4. **Charismatic:** Contrary to expectations, charisma played a more salient role than the Kitscheltian model from the 1990s assumed. It was more widespread and took a different form from the traditional notion of a political leader’s charisma, and it was notable that it was compatible with programmatic appeals. Most importantly, in the Slovak case we consider it useful to distinguish between the charisma of the political leader, which was undoubtedly the case of **Mečiar** (and to a lesser extent also **Fico**), and what we call the *charisma of righteous or virtuous ideas*. Here we included various stances usually described as anti-corruption or anti-establishment appeals. We consider that appeals related to criticism of the establishment and the conduct of the political class could be subsumed under the umbrella of charismatic appeals. They typically manifest a transformative ambition and include calls for integrity and competence in public office and claims of competence to rule based on moral arguments – namely, anti-corruption. The most evident proponents of the charisma of virtuous ideas in Slovak politics were, apart from **Smer-SD** before 2002 have primarily been **OĽaNO** and **We are Family**.
5. **Mixed charismatic-programmatic:** Here we are talking about a combination of programmatic appeals and the charisma of virtuous ideas (morally-based criticism of political conduct). Here we identify **ANO** and **early SaS** (before the 2016 elections) as the clearest examples.

Kotlebovci – People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) poses a challenge in terms of linkages. This is related to the more general problem of what linkage far-right anti-systemic parties offer voters as an accountability mechanism, especially if

they have gained and defended parliamentary representation. If one emphasises the anti-systemic character of a party such as ĽSNS, the accountability criterion could be its capacity to undermine the system of party interactions within the polity. There are, however, strong doubts that this would be its endgame as the party seems to have accommodated itself in the party system quite cosily, and it is certainly motivated to support the continuation of the democratic game for its own advantage. Another possibility is to highlight its far-right ideology and consider ĽSNS an extreme form of the appeal of the charisma of the righteous ideas. By providing voters with the possibility to vent their anger at what is perceived to be an extremely unfair, rigged system, the party has established a strong emotional link with its supporters. This suggests that supporters judge the party by its capacity to take revenge on the treacherous political class – though not necessarily by terminating democracy in the country. Thus, in terms of the concepts that inspired this text, it may be most appropriate to look at **party identification** – in a situation of perceived betrayal by the rest of the political class – as the “linkage” between ĽSNS and its voters.

Conclusion

The purpose of this text was to confront, with the benefit of the hindsight, the expectations originating in Kitschelt’s late 1990s analysis of the determinants of party competition in post-communist states (Kitschelt et al. 1999) with the actual development of the Slovak party system.

Expectations hold true through part of the 1990s: the charisma of Vladimír Mečiar was the dominant means of making connections to a sizeable part of electorate, who considered him the father of the nation. Also, clientelism was a primary tool for creating the aspiring regime’s own economic and political base, including new elites. Overall, the space for programmatic competition was almost non-existent as the dominant political conflict was fought over the character of the regime to be created in the newly independent state, and the rules of the democratic game to be played within its boundaries.

However, the success of Mečiar’s strategy also provoked a radical political response on the elite level in the late 1990s. Part of this response was publicly identifying with the Western style of politics, including the programmatic linkage as the primary competitive line of party competition. This was seen by the opposition as an effective tool for distancing themselves from Mečiar’s style of politics in the eyes of domestic and foreign audiences. The success of such a “programmatic strategy” was ultimately assisted by the prospect of EU membership. After receiving clear signals from the EU and the broader international community that EU membership was incompatible with Mečiar’s increasingly illiberal regime, electoral support for the “father of the nation” eventually decreased to the extent that his party could be left out of the government formation process in 1998.

The Slovak opposition managed not only to defeat Mečiar electorally, but also to develop the first set of policy measures that was accepted by a sizeable part of the population and which, when executed, for the first time brought relative prosperity to Slovakia's aspiring middle class, at least in the western part of the country. (It also contributed to the successful inclusion of the Slovak export-oriented economy into the larger international trade system and attracted a remarkable amount of foreign direct investment.) However, it also helped to create its own nemesis in the form of the new party Smer-SD.

Smer-SD was originally a largely non-ideological anti-establishment party. Its rise to political prominence was marked by the acceptance of the ruling logic of programmatic competition and creating its own programmatic offer. Following the 2002 elections Smer-SD presented itself as the left-wing, "social" pole of competing programmes alternatives, which was the opposite of its neoliberal counterparts in the government. The 2000s thus became the golden decade for Slovak programmatic competition, when two of its most important proponents, SDKÚ-DS and Smer-SD, ruled for the entire decade. In the second half of the decade, however, the dominance of programmatic competition started to fade when Smer-SD – like SDKÚ-DS before them – began to lose its trustworthiness and integrity in the eyes of their supporters.

Prior to the 2010 elections, when Smer-SD was in the "illiberal" coalition with SNS and HZDS, the Slovak party system witnessed a rare situation in which the pivotal party employed all three linkage mechanisms at the same time. While the programmatic linkage continued to be the flagship one, clientelism – in elite-level exchanges – and populist-charismatic appeals were used to compensate for the party's incremental loss of integrity. The decade of programmatic competition in Slovakia ended with the Great Recession, which manifested itself in Slovakia later than in many other European countries. It roughly coincided with the aftermath of the 2010 election. In this contest Smer-SD lost its pivotal position and was ousted from government, which among other things illustrates the strategic limits of maximizing all three linkages.

Smer-SD was deposed by the opposition coalition, which also included the new challenger party, SaS, which itself included members of the future radical charismatic challenger, OĽaNO. These two parties embodied the new spirit of charismatic linkage, although in the case of SaS this was combined with programmatic appeals (market liberal purifier). The new spirit was not, however, based on the charisma of an individual political leader, but the charisma of virtuous ideas (namely, anti-corruption ones). In this arrangement OĽaNO clearly represented the radical version of the charisma of righteous ideas and opened this avenue for followers in years to come. Once such charisma re-established itself as a factor in informing voter choice in Slovakia after 2010, programmatic competition never regained an impact comparable to the 2000s.

After the centre-right coalition lost power in snap elections in 2012 due to its strategic failures, Smer-SD again appeared to be the dominant party and was able to form a single-party government. This time, however, the hegemon came with only a semblance of programmatic competition. This was another quite unique situation in which the dominant party presented itself as the sole source of programmatic offer in the party system, thus suggesting that programmatic competition was unipolar.

Another important trend following the 2010 election was the rise of the radical challengers to mainstream political conduct, namely OĽaNO in 2012 and We are Family and People's Party – Our Slovakia in 2016. These parties competed exclusively on charismatic and moralistic appeals and therefore, even though SaS had in the meantime transformed into a largely programmatic party, the dominance of programmatic offers in the system has been never recovered.

The late 2010s also witnessed an attempt by the ruling parties, Smer-SD, SNS and Bridge, to employ clientelistic linkages, this time targeting selected audiences with collective benefits from public policy measures. The clientelistic linkage was for the first time presented as a legitimate one, since Smer-SD interpreted its social handouts as benefits that stemmed from its sound policy choices. This differed from the past, when the clientelistic linkage as a mechanism of accountability has been largely absent, with the possible exception of the ethnic Hungarian parties.

The 2020 elections ended the era of purported programmatic competition and promoted “righteous political conduct” as the dominant competitive line in Slovak politics. This has been unequivocally illustrated by the way in which the struggling anti-establishment challenger, OĽaNO, managed to quadruple its electoral support in the four months prior to the elections by running an emotional campaign targeting corruption and the country's degeneration into an “oligarchic state” (Gyárfášová – Učeň 2020b). The longevity of such a trend, however, cannot be assessed since the main proponent of the charisma of virtuous ideas, OĽaNO, lost a greater part of its popular support within a year of coming into office. This loss was mainly the consequence of their (mis)conduct in government in the tumultuous era of “Corona governance”. The splinter party from Smer-SD, HLAS, emerged as the new champion of popular support, capturing approximately a quarter of the electorate. While HLAS is clearly a “programmatic wannabe”, their true commitment to programmatic competition has been hinging on too many assumptions to be taken for granted.

The main findings of this account are that (1) clientelism as a linkage has played a considerably smaller role than predicted, while (2) charisma – even though we define it differently from some mainstream approaches – has manifested a much stronger than expected influence on party competition. Overall, charisma clearly outweighs clientelism as a linkage mechanism. In addition (3) the various combinations of charismatic and programmatic linkages seem to

be attractive for a number of relevant Slovak parties. Finally, (4) programmatic competition has shaped Slovak politics more successfully and for longer than Kitschelt's model would suggest.

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