

'NON-STANDARD' POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE CAPACITY TO GOVERN IN TURBULENT TIMES: SLOVAKIA 2020–2022

Ivan MALÝ
Juraj NEMEC

Ivan MALÝ

Associate professor, Faculty of Economics and Administration,
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
E-mail: ivan.maly@econ.muni.cz

Juraj NEMEC

Professor, Faculty of Economics and Administration,
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
Tel.: 00421-905-164820
E-mail: juraj.nemec@econ.muni.cz

Abstract

This article evaluates whether the failures of the two coalition governments that presided over Slovakia between March 2020 and September 2022 should be connected primarily to the two crises of the investigated period (COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine), or whether other critical factors were involved. Our findings highlight the limited performance of public administration in Slovakia and the very limited capacity of both governments to govern during the selected period. We confirmed that the coalition governments were created from 'non-standard' political parties, and the leadership was problematic. We do not insist that these factors are interrelated, but the possibility should be the focus of further research.

Keywords: 'non-standard' political party, Slovakia, crisis, governance, capacity to govern.

1. Introduction

The 2020–2022 Slovak Republic governments under prime ministers Igor Matovič (March 2020 to April 2021) and Eduard Heger (April 2021 to May 2023) represented a very interesting period that should be investigated in depth by political and administrative sciences. In the national parliamentary elections on February 29, 2020, the opposition, led by the movement OĽaNO (headed by Matovič), achieved a clear victory. OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) itself received 25% of the votes and won the elections. With other opposition parties—Sme Rodina (We Are Family), SaS (Freedom and Solidarity), and Za ľudí (For the People)—the new coalition achieved a constitutional majority in Parliament: 95 seats out of 150. However, after one year, in March 2021, Prime Minister Matovič was forced to resign (the formal resignation on April 1, 2021); after two years, a no-confidence vote in Parliament formally ended the dominance of the coalition government created by the 2020 elections. At that time, the trust in the government in Slovakia decreased by approximately 20%, to the lowest level in the European Union.

What happened between 2020 and 2022? Was the failure of the coalition government to stay in power and to retain the public trust connected solely with the two crises of the investigated period—COVID-19 and the Ukrainian war—and their impact on citizens? Or did other factors serve as catalysts? Could the character of the parties from the coalition and the personalities of the prime ministers have played a role?

This article responds to these questions using qualitative research methods. The term ‘non-standard’ political party will be used. This term is not yet fully anchored within political and administrative sciences theory; it is primarily used by authors from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where this phenomenon seems more common. The added value of this article is twofold: it introduces the interesting circumstances of the 2020–2022 Slovak governments, and it enriches the scarce literature concerning the relationship between the character of the parties in power (including their leaders) and the public administration performance of a country.

2. Theoretical background

Three critical terms create the theoretical background for this article: ‘capacity to govern’, ‘governance in turbulent times’, and ‘non-standard political party’. The first two terms have been sufficiently investigated in the existing literature. The third term is not yet fully anchored and therefore deserves special attention.

2.1. *Capacity to govern*

The term ‘capacity to govern’ became a topic of debate in political and administrative sciences at the beginning of this century when Yehezkel Dror published his well-known book *The Capacity to Govern* (Dror, 2001). A complex text on the capacity to govern was later delivered by Van Popering *et al.* (2022). The authors conducted a literature review and organized focus groups. Based on their results, they proposed the following five elements of governance capacity: (1) collective action, (2) coordination, (3) resilience,

(4) learning, and (5) resources. They also provided a definition (Van Popering *et al.*, 2022, p. 1770): ‘governance capacity is the potential of actors to coordinate their actions and the deployment of resources in the pursuit of collective issues’.

The term ‘capacity to govern’ is significantly interlinked with the terms ‘good governance’ and ‘quality of governance’, which seem to be more frequently used, especially in political documents. The Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA–OECD), a joint initiative of the OECD and the European Union, has been working on principles of good governance since the end of the last century; its principles cover six core areas (SIGMA, 2017): the strategic framework of public administration reform, policy development and co-ordination, public service and human resource management, accountability, service delivery, and public financial management. In 2018, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations endorsed the eleven principles of effective governance for sustainable development. The eleven principles are (United Nations, 2018): competence, sound policymaking, collaboration, integrity, transparency, independent oversight, leaving no one behind, non-discrimination, participation, subsidiarity, and intergenerational equity.

In the CEE region, the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPAcee) think tank organized activities connected to the topic of ‘the capacity to govern’. These activities included a high-level meeting titled ‘The Capacity to Govern in Central and Eastern Europe’, held in Prague on December 18–20, 2003, under the auspices of the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, Vladimír Špidla, and the 11th NISPAcee Annual Conference in Bucharest, Romania, in 2003, under the heading ‘Enhancing the Capacities to Govern: Challenges Facing the CEE Countries’.

At the conference in Bucharest, Dror (2004, pp. 23–25) proposed nine recommendations to the CEE governments supporting the increase of their capacity to govern: facilitate better public understanding about main policy issues, upgrade government morality, assure the democratic concentration of power, build a central ‘strategic brain’, upgrade the understanding of situations and dynamics, institutionalize appropriate choice processes, improve governmental learning, assure high-quality crisis coping, and provide politicians with learning opportunities and incentives. Martin Potůček (2004, p. 28) favored the term ‘good governance’. Potůček proposed (2004, p. 29) ten critical factors that affect the quality of governance: an analytical basis for decision-making; communication in the public space; strategic thinking and governance; the democratic mediation of interests; the transparency of political parties; the accountability of the government; the interweaving of politics, the market, and the media; an appropriate approach to social exclusion; education in public policy and administration; and the global context of policy-making.

2.2. Governance in turbulent times

The specific characteristics of governance in turbulent times have only recently become a focus of academic research. In 2018, Ansell and Trondal (2018, p. 1) defined turbulence as ‘situations where events, demands, and support interact and change in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected, or unpredictable ways’. Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing (2023, p. 3)

expressed the opinion ‘that turbulence has become a chronic and endemic condition for modern governance’. They also argued that ‘the key property for relating stability to change in a new way is robustness’ (Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2023, p. 8).

The concept of robustness is rather new. It is connected with names like Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing (2021), Capano and Woo (2018), Ferraro, Etzioni and Gehman (2015), and Trondal, Haslerud and Kühn (2021). According to these authors, robust governance systems must be able to change to preserve their functionality in the face of turbulence. Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing (2021, p. 952) also stressed that a robust governance system is an environment ‘where creative and agile public organizations adapt to the emergence of new disruptive problems by building networks and partnerships with the private sector and civil society’.

The recent European-funded project Robust Governance in Turbulent Times (<https://robust-crisis-governance.eu/> (ROBUST)) proposed that robustness should include the abilities to be innovative and to adapt, constituted by interactivity in multi-level governance, hybridity in governance, democracy, and law, and negotiability of societal intelligence. It operationalized robustness by connecting it with two dimensions (legs): adaptiveness and innovativeness. Governments should be able to adapt existing forms of public policy, regulation, and services to the unpredictable dynamics of the crisis and to deliver innovative new forms of public policy, regulation, and services in response (Nõmmik *et al.*, 2023).

2.3. Non-standard political party

The concept of ‘non-standard’ political formations was introduced to the specific national context by the Slovak political scientist Grigorij Mesežnikov (Mesežnikov, 1995, pp. 106–107). According to Mesežnikov, ‘standard’ political parties could be placed within a traditional conservative-liberal-social democratic spectrum, and ‘non-standard’ political formations were parties or movements that were distinguished by a propensity to national and social populism, authoritarianism, radicalism, extremism, and an inclination toward confrontational politics and strong leadership. The Austrian economist Joachim Becker uses the term ‘non-standard parties’ and contrasts it with the term ‘traditional parties’ (Becker, 2014).

In the Czech Republic, one specific form of the ‘non-standard’ political party was defined by Hloušek and Kopeček (2017). They used the term ‘entrepreneurial political party’, adding that most parties of this variety established a profile by protesting against the existing party elites and criticizing them for merging with the state. Hloušek and Kopeček (2017, p. 83) stated that ‘non-standard’ political parties are typified by institutional un-rootedness and have three basic features: ‘(1) the central role of the leader and his private initiative, (2) the party as a personal vehicle, and (3) the crucial formative influence of a leader over the political project’. Juraj Marušiak (2023) added one more specific feature of ‘non-standard’ political parties: the non-existence of local and regional structures.

It is necessary to stress that the term ‘non-standard political party’ can be misused in many ways and is currently often used in a negative sense by politicians in the context of

political competition. Marušiak (2023, 183) argued: ‘It follows then that the marking of the party as ‘standard’ or ‘non-standard’ was used instrumentally, in order to disqualify political opponents’. Taking this into account, in this article we use the term ‘non-standard’ very carefully and with quotation marks. Marušiak (2023) also argued that certain trends toward oligarchizing the decision-making process at the expense of intraparty democracy also exist in Western democracies. He noted that this phenomenon was mentioned by Moisey Ostrogorski in 1902 in relation to the ‘traditional’ political parties in the United Kingdom. Marušiak (2023) stressed that a trend toward the ‘presidentialization’ of power was present in many contemporary European political parties.

3. Methodology

For this article, we used the case study method, a standard method of qualitative research (Ochrana, 2019). We selected the country Slovakia and the period from 2020 to 2022. When the new government took office on March 21, 2020, it benefited from a high level of public trust of almost 60%. At the end of the investigated period, trust in the government in Slovakia had decreased below 20%, the lowest in the EU-27. The two ruling governments lost most of their trust in them during the investigated period, and existing evaluations have suggested that the public administration performance in Slovakia deteriorated.

Both governments that were in power during the investigated period of 2020 to 2022 consisted of the same four political parties, although a different prime minister was appointed in 2021. At least three of the four parties had a specific (‘non-standard’) character—OĽaNO, Sme rodina, and Za ľudí (the fourth political party, SaS, is marginally ‘non-standard’).

The period from 2020 to 2022 was a turbulent time for Slovakia. The COVID-19 crisis started in spring 2020 and lasted for three years: the crisis situation status due to COVID-19 was announced in Slovakia on March 12, 2020, and formally ended on September 15, 2023, when it was abolished by the ruling government. On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation started an attack on Ukraine, with massive consequences for Slovakia, particularly the challenges of migration and high inflation. This study investigates which factors other than crises should be considered to explain the visible failure of the 2020–2022 Slovak governments, with a focus on the character of the ruling governments and their leaders. The research questions are:

RQ1: How did the Slovak public administration performance develop during the 2020-2022 period?

RQ2: What was the capacity to govern of the 2020-2022 Slovak governments? Did they deliver ‘robust’ governance?

The first research question will be addressed based on the contents of regular European public administration country reports (European Commission, n.d.). These reports are

prepared by top public administration experts and then checked and approved by both the European Union and the respective member state, so their contents should be reliable.

The second research question will be addressed based on the expert opinion method. Based on a literature review, we prepared a short questionnaire and sent it to top Slovak public administration experts. The list of experts is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Structure of contacted experts

	Position of expert	Experience
1	Senior civil servant	More than 40 years
2	Retired senior civil servant	More than 40 years
3	Policy advisor	25 years
4	Entrepreneur with public administration experience	30 years
5	Academic person with public administration profile	30 years
6	Academic person with public administration profile	25 years
7	Academic person with public administration profile	25 years

Source: Authors

4. Case study: Slovakia between spring 2020 and summer 2022

This case study delivers the background of what happened in Slovakia from 2020 to 2022 and offers a comprehensive response to the first research question concerning how public administration performance developed during this period.

4.1. Background

From 2016 to 2020, the political party Smer (Direction) led the government coalition. The period was connected with many corruption scandals. Journalist Ján Kuciak, who was investigating tax fraud in connection with Slovak politicians, and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were shot to death in their home in Veľká Mača on February 21, 2018. This set off protests related to the abuse of power in the government; the protests forced Prime Minister Robert Fico to resign. He was replaced in 2018 by Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini from the same party. One of the main themes of the 2020 election campaign was the issue of systemic corruption in the country; opposition parties successfully used this theme to gain popularity.

National elections were held on February 29, 2020. The political movement OĽaNO was met with great success. It was headed by Igor Matovič, who promised that his government, if elected, would be a strict fighter against corruption. OĽaNO received approximately 25% of the votes and created a ruling coalition with another political movement, Sme Rodina, and two political parties—SaS and Za ľudí. This coalition reached a constitutional majority in Parliament, with 95 deputies out of 150. The new coalition government came to power on March 21, 2020, just at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. At the time

of its start, the new government, which promised to be strictly anti-corruption and citizen-oriented, benefited from a high level of public trust.

Immediately after coming into power, the new government had to cope with the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. It is fair to stress that the previous government under Prime Minister Pellegrini had implemented the first measures related to the COVID-19 crisis even before the first case appeared in Slovakia on March 6, 2020. It also introduced a comprehensive set of anti-pandemic measures. An emergency situation was declared on March 11. The restrictive measures were similar to those of other countries—closing schools, banning all mass activities, closing borders, introducing compulsory home quarantine, closing most shops and services, and ordering the use of protective face masks everywhere. Thanks to the fast and comprehensive response, dominantly connected to the Pellegrini government, Slovakia was probably the most successful country in the European Union in the fight against COVID-19, based on mortality and morbidity data. Slovakia registered 1,951 cases and only 28 people were reported to have died of COVID-19 as of July 15, 2020 (Nemec, Malý and Chubarova, 2021), when most measures were repealed.

When the COVID-19 situation started to worsen in late July as the number of infected cases began to increase, the Matovič government did not manage to react in time or with the necessary measures. In early September, Matovič (based on his own opinion) rejected proposals from epidemiologists for the immediate reintroduction of strict anti-pandemic measures. However, on September 25, he changed the rhetoric, telling people that strict measures were necessary because the citizens lacked self-discipline. In late October, Matovič initiated a unique experiment—blanket antigen testing of almost the entire population. Testing during the first stage was carried out in three phases; in the second phase, 3,625,332 people were tested, with 38,359 positive results. This mass testing was presented by Matovič as a ‘nuclear option’; however, most experts did not share his optimism and the data did not show any significant longer-term impact on COVID-19 morbidity (for more see Klimovský, Malý and Nemec, 2021).

Matovič, following his own opinion about the great success of mass testing, tried to repeat this experiment in January 2021. However, he did not find support within his government or from academia; an atmosphere of distrust was created as a result. Matovič openly attacked anybody (including some people from within his ruling coalition) who presented a different opinion. The tensions driven by Matovič’s words and actions were stressful for all the relevant stakeholders. As a result, the functionality of the government was paralyzed by early spring 2021 and Matovič was forced to resign. He was replaced by Prime Minister Heger from the same political party, and Matovič was transferred to the position of minister of finance. The ruling coalition continued to have a constitutional majority in the national parliament. Prime Minister Heger and his administration prepared a programmatic statement for 2021–2024, which was essentially a continuation of the programmatic statement from 2020. The government also prepared a Slovak recovery and resilience plan.

The government of Prime Minister Heger survived a bit more than one year. His failure cannot be directly connected with the new crisis of the war in Ukraine, which started

in February 2022 and had a major impact on Slovakia, especially in the form of a huge number of arriving refugees and massive inflation. In the summer of 2022, the tensions between the members of the coalition became critical, very much because of Matovič's expressions and proposals—Matovič remained the leader of OĽaNO even after he resigned from his position as prime minister. The political party SaS left the coalition by August 31, 2022, and all of the ministers who were from this party resigned in early September. SaS switched to the opposition, with a formal majority in Parliament: 82 of 150 deputies. The tensions in Parliament increased after this move. On December 15, 2022, Parliament expressed no confidence in the ruling government by 78 votes, forcing the resignation of the Heger government. The President appointed the Heger government to rule temporarily until there could be extraordinary elections. The term of the extraordinary elections was set by Parliament to the latest possible day—September 30, 2023. The Heger government did not manage to stay in office to this date; it was replaced on May 15, 2023, by the 'professional' government of Prime Minister Ludovít Ódor. The direct reasons for this change were the corruption scandal of one of the ministers and the subsequent resignation of other ministers of the Heger government.

The OĽaNO government was in office for a very short period—from March 2020 to September (or formally to December) 2022. Over slightly more than two years, the number of coalition deputies in Parliament decreased from 95 to 72 and the public trust in the government decreased to the lowest level in the European Union. Such a failure is unusual in Europe and probably even worldwide. All governments had to cope with COVID-19 and introduce unpopular measures; we are not aware of any other government experiencing such a massive loss of power and trust.

The fact that the coalition failed was confirmed by the national elections on September 30, 2023. Robert Fico's political party Smer won the elections with 23% of votes and was given a chance to form a new government. OĽaNO (with its new coalition partners) received only 8.9%; SaS got 6.3%. The two other members of the former coalition, Za ľudí and Sme Rodina, did not pass the threshold. On October 25, 2023, Fico was formally appointed as the new prime minister by the president.

4.2. Public administration performance in Slovakia 2020–2022

Before starting the analysis, it is necessary to mention two key external challenges of the investigated period—the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine. The issue of the COVID-19 crisis was described in detail above. The war in Ukraine also significantly affected Slovakia. Between the start of the war in February 2022 and mid-May 2023, 1.4 million Ukrainian citizens crossed the Slovak border, and almost 116,000 of them received the status of temporary refugee placement. The massive inflow of refugees created the need to deliver a comprehensive set of public services, including health care, education, employment opportunities, housing, etc. Volunteers and non-governmental organizations helped, but the demand on the public administration bodies was extraordinary. Massive financial resources were invested to help. Beyond the direct impacts, the crisis was connected with massive inflation, especially due to the excessive increase in energy prices. The

management of this crisis was not perfect, but much more successful than the management of the COVID-19 crisis, thanks to the actors involved. However, some questions and doubts have arisen about the legality of the actions of the temporary government after December 2022, especially regarding the supply of weapons to Ukraine. Moreover, the destabilization of the Slovak public finances is at least partly connected to this factor.

Overall performance

World Bank data suggest that the overall government effectiveness in Slovakia decreased (especially comparatively) during the investigated period (Table 2). Slovakia is now ranked as one of the lowest performing countries in the European Union—only Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland (the position of Poland might be disputable) are lower.

Table 2: Government effectiveness in Slovakia 2019–2022

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Percentile rank	71.4	69	68.6	63.7
Score	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4

Source: World Bank (n.d.)

The Eurobarometer data measured the level of trust in the government in Slovakia in mid-2022 as the lowest in the EU-27, at slightly over 20%; this dropped to 18% at the end of 2022 (Prime Minister Heger’s government was still in power at that time).

Public finances deteriorated as public revenues decreased and public spending increased significantly. The deficit was approximately 5.4% of the GDP in 2020 and 2021 (still 2% in 2022), far over the Maastricht criteria maximum level of 3%. The government debt level crossed the ‘magic’ reference value of 60% of GDP in 2021; it returned to 58% in 2022, especially thanks to legislatively defined automatic mechanisms. The health of Slovak public finance was certainly affected by COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine and the resultant massive inflation; however, the long-term problems such as pension reform and health care financing, stressed by the European Commission (2022) in the context of the European Semester, remain unsolved.

The fight against corruption was the officially stated priority of the Slovak governments in power after March 2020. During 2021 and 2022, the number of investigated cases significantly increased in comparison to the past, and top civil servants and judges were among those under criminal investigation for corruption. A few of those who were investigated have already been sentenced.

However, there are several ‘buts’ related to the fight against corruption. There is an ongoing discussion about the legality of some investigations, as in many cases the evidence was based only on the statements of those under investigation or was collected illegally. The prosecutor general’s office used the right to stop the investigation of misconducted cases (paragraph 363 of the Penalty Code) for almost 30 cases (Benedikovičová and Prušová, 2023). These ‘stops’ are the subject of massive polemics in Slovak society, with no definitive conclusions reached.

High level politicians from the ‘anti-corruption’ governments are included in the investigations. The government appointed by Prime Minister Heger collapsed in May 2023 because of a corruption scandal involving the Minister of Agriculture. In August 2023, the National Criminal Investigation Agency started investigating the director of the Slovak Secret Service, the previous director of the Secret Service (appointed in 2020), and the director of the National Security Office.

Coordination, policy-making, and implementation

The European Semester 2022 country report on Slovakia was rather critical regarding coordination: ‘The low capacity of the public administration is a serious bottleneck for investments and reforms. The lack of human resource management, effective governance, and coordination across areas such as administration, justice, services to people and businesses and research and innovation often result in delayed or only partial implementation of reforms’ (European Commission, 2022, p. 9). It can be concluded that the overall coordination capacity of the government did not increase during the period under review.

In terms of policy making, Prime Minister Heger’s government prepared and submitted Slovakia’s recovery and resilience plan. However, the implementation of this plan met several problems. We provide one example related to this. In the area of education, controversial decisions were made at the higher education level. The new university law no. 412/2022 was voted by Parliament in March 2022, with the official aim of improving the quality of higher education. However, this law significantly decreased academic autonomy, especially at the faculty level. Most Slovak universities went on strike the day Parliament voted on this law.

The most critical issue to mention in this section is the legislative ‘mass’. Following standard procedures, all new laws are subject to public consultations and ex-ante regulatory impact analysis. However, such a comprehensive ex-ante assessment can be bypassed for emergency procedures, for parliament-sponsored laws, or when the particular law also deals with issues beyond its own scope.

All bypass options were ‘overutilized’ during the investigated period. Approximately 50% of the laws passed in 2020 were emergency procedure laws; this was dramatically up from 16% in 2021 and was used many times in cases with no actual time pressure. Parliament-sponsored laws represented approximately 20% of the laws passed in 2020; this rose to almost 50% in 2021. The transparency of the legislative process decreased. According to Štátná (2022), during the period from January 1, 2022, to June 30, 2022, a total of 183 draft laws were submitted to Parliament. However, only 17 of them followed the Slov-lex system, which is the main tool for public consultations on draft laws.

Civil service

Using the argument that the government needed tools to remove ‘old, corrupted structures,’ the Slovak Parliament amended Civil Service Law no. 55/2017 on October 7, 2021. The most critical aspect of this change was the fact that the new legislation allowed politically appointed general directors to dismiss any ‘leading’ civil servant without explicit reasoning. The same principle applied also to the policy of civil service. This change was an

important step back toward the politicization of the civil service (for more see Staroňová and Rybář, 2021). This change fully contradicted the promises of an evaluated government that had been made in the programmatic statement—promises to build a professional, educated, and stable civil service based on a transparent and predictable management system. In 2020, the heads of the district state administration offices were appointed by Prime Minister Matovič without any competition.

Transparency and accountability

The transparency data provided by the European Commission might be influenced by some methodological problems (Table 3). In any case, Slovakia was at the bottom of the list for the European Union in 2022 (26th place for transparency and 25th place for open data).

Table 3: Transparency of government in Slovakia 2020–2022

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Government transparency	x	51.15	51.16	38.43	55.58
Maturity of open data	73.60	n.a.	53.04	50.08	59.37

Source: European Union (2022)

Accountability and particularly accountability mechanisms were another problematic issue. The Supreme Audit Office delivered interesting performance reports; however, the impacts of these reports were insufficient as the reports were not regularly used as a resource for changing and improving public administration practices in the country. The position of ombudsperson was neglected by the elevated ruling coalition. In 2021, Parliament did not accept the annual ombudsperson report. The institution of ombudsperson was non-functional from late March to early November 2022.

Service provision and digitalization

Digitalization was an area with some absolute, but very limited relative progress. The Eurostat data related to the quality and scope of the Slovak e-government are available and presented in Table 4.

Table 4: E-government developments in Slovakia 2020–2022

	2019	2020	2021	2022
E-government users interacting with public authorities (%)	51.28	58.95	61.84	55.95
E-government users obtaining information from public authorities (%)	47.22	51.39	51.84	n.a.
E-government users downloading official forms (%)	25.2	27.52	29.69	n.a.
E-government users submitting completed forms (%)	17.73	19.22	25.17	n.a.

Source: Eurostat

Taking into account the large sums of resources used to improve IT services for citizens and the fact that digitalization was a priority of the recovery and resilience plan, progress

has been very slow. The positive fact is that the Ministry of Economy prepared three sets of proposals on how to decrease the bureaucratic burden ('Podnikateľské kilečko'), with approximately 1,500 measures to improve the situation. The law against bureaucracy prepared by the previous government (law no. 177/2018) was amended and now codifies the principle 'once is enough' (information that is already in the state registries cannot be requested by state bodies). However, the 'digital gap' has been ineffectively addressed. Marginal social groups, which represent a significant percentage of the population, often do not have access to digital services. Purchasing laptops for minorities in 2022 was an example of ineffective policies—most pupils who received such laptops did not have access to electricity.

5. Capacity to govern (in turbulent times)

This section responds to the second research question using the expert method (Table 5). We did not split the 2020–2022 period into two subperiods (Matovič and Heger periods), as the structure of the government did not change significantly in 2021 when Matovič was forced to resign from the position of prime minister.

Table 5: The capacity to govern of the Slovak government 2020–2022

	Yes	Partly	No
General capacity to govern			
Did the government have sufficient capacity to deliver evidence-based policy making?	x	xxxx	xx
Did the government manage to coordinate the implementation of public policies?		xx	xxxxx
Did the government cooperate with all stakeholders?		xxxx	xxx
Did the government have the capacity to learn?		xx	xxxxx
Did the government use available resources in efficient and effective ways to achieve the public policy priorities?		xx	xxxxx
Was the government accountable?		x	xxxxxx
Did the civil service function apolitically and professionally?	x	xxxx	xx
Did the government act in transparent ways?		xxxx	xxx
Capacity to govern in turbulent times			
Did the government have the capacity to adapt its policies, regulations, and service delivery to rapid changes during crises?		xxxx	xxx
Did the government have the capacity to implement innovative solutions in public policy, regulations, and service delivery in reaction to crises?		xxx	xxxx
Final score	34 out of 140 as maximum		

Note: the score is calculated as follows: yes=2 points, partly=1 point, no=0 points

Source: Authors

According to expert opinions, the final score of the 2020–2022 Slovak governments is rather low. The results certainly should not be considered to apply uniformly to all ministries; some examples of good practices were visible.

One interviewed expert characterized the ruling governments as follows:

‘Prime Minister Matovič’s government was chaotic and vulgar. It started with a constitutional majority in Parliament and a high level of trust. However, it lost this majority and trust very fast. Prime Minister Heger tried to be more moderate, but did not have real power in his hands, as Mr. Matovič remained the leading figure within OLaNO. [Heger’s] definite switch from the destructive leadership of Mr. Matovič [Heger established his own political party in March 2023] came too late. Both prime ministers might be characterized as ‘micromanagers’. They did not have the capacity to delegate, also because of a lack of human capacities within OLaNO. Mr. Matovič surrounded himself with ‘toxic’ personalities with their own interests and the will to advocate and execute any absurd decision. Both prime ministers, especially Mr. Matovič, fully trusted their own analytical capacities, and because of this they did not cooperate with experts who offered capacities and solutions.’

The fact that the capacity of the evaluated governments to govern was very limited and the quality of their crisis management very problematic was also stressed in other interesting comments provided by our experts, in addition to their ‘scoring exercise’. We quote the most representative one:

‘The evaluated governments would cause critical problems also in non ‘multi-crisis’ times (COVID-19, war in Ukraine, refugee crisis, energy crisis...). They undermined the principle of subsidiarity, the concept of the rule of law, the fiscal discipline, the principle of mutual respect, and presented several ‘nuclear options’ that were not to the benefit of the population.’

6. Discussion

This section adds to the analysis beyond the specific dimension of this article—the fact that the ruling coalition in Slovakia during 2020–2022 was an entity that cannot be labeled as a fully ‘standard’ political party and the fact that the quality of leadership during the period was disputable.

Two out of the four members of the coalition were not political parties, but political movements, including the leading member OLaNO. Both of these members were clear examples of ‘non-standard’ political subjects (Table 6).

From 2011 to 2019, the only ruling person within OLaNO was Igor Matovič. The original statute of OLaNO directly stated that the leader acts in all matters and approves all matters. In 2019, the OLaNO Presidium was created to reflect changes in the legislature preventing parties without collective bodies from being candidates in the parliamentary elections. The regional structures of OLaNO were initiated only after the 2020 election victory. OLaNO does not have a clear ideological orientation; the movement builds on popular issues and promises to deal with them.

Table 6: Ruling coalition in Slovakia 2020–2022

	Established	Organizational form	The central role of the leader and his private initiative	The party as a personal vehicle	The crucial formative influence of a leader over the political project	The existence of local and regional structures
OLaNO	2011	Movement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, but not from the beginning
SaS	2009	Party	Partly	Partly	Partly	Yes
Sme rodina	2015	Movement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, but not from the beginning
Za ľudí	2019	Party	Yes, for the original leader Kiska	n.a	n.a	No

Source: Authors

Sme Rodina is very similar. Its leader Boris Kollár has built this movement on his own personality. Decision-making within the movement is centralistic and formally collective. Regional structures exist, but the real power is in the hands of one person. The movement does not have a clear ideological orientation; similar to OLaNO, it builds on populist issues. Mr. Kollár is a wealthy entrepreneur.

The political party Za ľudí is a very unusual case. The party was created by the former Slovak president Andrej Kiska, who resigned from the party ‘for health reasons’ in early 2020, soon after the elections, after several scandals connected with his name. Za ľudí was initially yet another example of a ‘one man’ party; after Kiska’s resignation, the party started to lose its homogeneity. Over the course of the investigated period, most of its members of parliament moved to various parliamentary clubs. As a result, Za ľudí had disappeared as a real political subject by 2021.

The only at least ‘semi-standard’ political party within the 2020–2022 ruling coalition was SaS. This party somehow ‘fulfilled’ most of the criteria of a ‘standard’ political party. The position of SaS within the coalition was very specific, as its leader Richard Sulík was not afraid to oppose most of the problematic proposals by Mr. Matovič, even in public. SaS ‘organized’ the end of both the Matovič and Heger governments.

The issue of leadership is connected especially with Prime Minister Matovič. He had experience in top-level politics, having spent a few electoral periods as a member of parliament and as the leader of one of the opposition parties. However, the fact that he had absolutely no personal practical experience with executive power in March 2020 and the fact that his communication style was rather problematic quickly became visible. Prime Minister Matovič showed a nearly nonexistent capacity to consult public policies regularly or systematically, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. In this period, despite his lack of medical expertise or executive experience, he tried to behave as a dominant leader, suggesting ‘camera ready’ solutions. Many advisory body proposals were rejected and even publicly mocked directly by him.

The most visible issues were his public statements in the position of the Prime Minister and later as the Minister of Finance. For example, when most medical experts protested in October 2020 against blanket testing, he publicly insulted them in retaliation. He also publicly accused his coalition partner and leader of the political party SaS of ‘killing’ thousands of Slovak people by blocking the second phase of the blanket testing. Hate and mutual slander had been part of the Slovak political scene before, especially during Prime Minister Mečiar’s government. However, their presence increased significantly as the result of Mr. Matovič’s actions.

7. Conclusions

The goal of this article was to respond to interesting questions connected with the ruling coalition and its government during 2020–2022 in Slovakia, as formulated in the introduction. The specific sub-goal was to contribute to the need to ‘anchor’ the term ‘non-standard’ in reference to a political party. The goals were operationalized via research questions.

Our analysis suggests that the performance of the Slovak public administration appeared relatively poor in the 2020–2022 period. It also suggests that both Slovak governments faced a limited capacity to govern and a very limited ability to govern in turbulent times in the period under review. The discussion section adds the specific dimension of ‘non-standard’ political party and ‘non-standard’ leadership to our analysis. These two phenomena seem very visible in Slovakia during the 2020–2022 period. We do not intend to establish or even quantify any direct relations between the government performance and the government structure. This would be too ambitious, taking into account the extreme difficulty of such research. We leave this issue as a challenge for future research.

The direct contribution of our research is the attempt to suggest that our three investigated areas may have mutual influence; greater focus in this direction should be the challenge for future research. For example, to better understand current democracy, such research should include: (1) elections can be won on popular and narrow topics like corruption; however, trust in government is based on its capacity to rule the state in full complexity; (2) a limited capacity to agree on priorities is a typical feature of all coalitions, but this is especially true if non-standard political parties are involved; and (3) each government and politician behaves as they are allowed to do.

References:

1. Ansell, C. and Trondal, J., ‘Governing Turbulence: An Organizational-institutional Agenda’, 2018, *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 43–57.
2. Ansell, C., Sørensen, E. and Torfing, J., ‘Public Administration and Politics Meet Turbulence: The Search for Robust Governance Responses’, 2023, *Public Administration*, vol. 101, no. 1, pp. 3–22.

3. Ansell, C., Sørensen, E. and Torfing, J., 'The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Game Changer for Public Administration and Leadership? The Need for Robust Governance Responses to Turbulent Problems', 2021, *Public Management Review*, vol. 23, no. 7, pp. 949–960.
4. Becker, J., 'Vzostup neštandardných strán' (Rise of Non-standard Parties), 2014, *Deník Referendum* (Referendum Newspaper), [Online] available at <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/18419-vzostup-nestandardnych-stran>, accessed on October 25, 2023.
5. Benedikovičová, M. and Prušová, V., 'Odkryli sme, ako u Žilinku používajú paragraf 363 v prospech prominentov' (We Discovered How They Use Section 363 in Žilinka in Favor of Prominent People), 2023, [Online] available at <https://dennikn.sk/3553521/odkryli-sme-ako-u-zilinku-pouzivaju-paragraf-363-v-prospech-prominentov/>, accessed on October 9, 2023.
6. Capano, G. and Woo, J., 'Designing Policy Robustness: Outputs and Processes', 2018, *Policy and Society*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 422–440.
7. Dror, Y., 'Gearing Central and Eastern European Governments Towards Weaving the Future through Ruptures in History', in Bryane, M., Kattel, R. and Drechsler, W. (eds.), *Enhancing the Capacities to Govern: Challenges Facing the Central and Eastern European Countries*, Bratislava: NISPAcee, 2004, pp. 17–26.
8. Dror, Y., *The Capacity to Govern*, London: Frank Cass, 2001.
9. European Commission, '2022 Country Report – Slovakia', May 23, 2022, [Online] available at https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/2022-european-semester-country-report-slovakia_en.pdf, accessed on October 7, 2023.
10. European Commission, 'European Public Administration Country Reports', n.d., [Online] available at https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/structural-reform-support/european-public-administration-country-reports_en, accessed on October 7, 2023.
11. Eurostat, 'Digital Economy and Society', [Online] available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Digital_economy_and_society, accessed on October 7, 2023.
12. Ferraro, F., Etzioni, D. and Gehman, J., 'Tackling Grand Challenges Pragmatically: Robust Action Revisited', 2015, *Organization Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 363–390.
13. Hloušek, V. and Kopeček, L., 'Entrepreneurial Parties: A Basic Conceptual Framework', 2017, *Czech Journal of Political Science*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 83–91.
14. Klimovský, D., Malý, I. and Nemeč, J., 'Collaborative Governance Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemics: Czech Republic and Slovakia', 2021, *Central European Public Administration Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 85–106.
15. Law no. 177/2018, Antibureaucratic law, [Online] available at <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2018-177/>, accessed on October 9, 2023.
16. Law no. 412/2022 on higher education, [Online] available at <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2002/131/20230101/>, accessed on October 9, 2023.
17. Marušiak, J., 'Political Entrepreneurs as a Challenge for the Party System in Slovakia', 2023, *Politologický časopis – Czech Journal of Political Science*, vol. 2, pp. 179–200.
18. Mesežnikov, G., 'The Parliamentary Elections 1994: A Confirmation of the Split of the Party System in Slovakia', in Szomolanyi, S. and Mesežnikov, G. (eds.), *Slovakia: Parliamentary Elections 1994. Causes, Consequences, Prospects*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association, 1995, pp. 103–113.

19. Nemeč, J., Malý, I. and Chubarova, T., 'Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Potential Outcomes in Central and Eastern Europe: Comparing the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation, and the Slovak Republic', 2021, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 282–290.
20. Nõmmik, S., Duarte Coroado, S., Verhoest, K. and Randma-Liiv, T., 'Framework for Studying Hybridity During Crises', Roskilde: University of Roskilde (internal project material), 2023.
21. Ochrana, F., *Metodologie, metody a metodika vědeckého výzkumu* (Methodology and Method of Scientific Research), Praha: Karolinum, 2019.
22. Potůček, M., 'The Capacities to Govern in Central and Eastern Europe', in Bryane, M., Kattel, R. and Drechsler, W. (eds.), *Enhancing the Capacities to Govern: Challenges Facing the Central and Eastern European Countries*, Bratislava: NISPAcee, 2004, pp. 27–48.
23. SIGMA OECD, *The Principles of Public Administration*, Paris: SIGMA OECD, 2017.
24. Staroňová, K. and Rybář, M., 'Matovičova Koalícia Sa Chce Vrátiť k Zavrhnutej Praxi Predchádzajúcich Vlád' (Matovič's Coalition Wants to Return to the Rejected Practice of Previous Governments), 2021, [Online] available at <https://dennikn.sk/2414483/matovicova-koalicia-sa-chce-vratit-k-zavrhnutej-praxi-predchadzajucich-vlad/>, accessed on October 9, 2023.
25. Štátná, N., *Ako dokáže pandémia pokaziť recept na zákon?* (How Can the Pandemic Spoil the Recipe for the Law?), Bratislava: Comenius University, 2022.
26. Trondal, J., Haslerud, G. and Kühn, N., 'The Robustness of National Agency Governance in Integrated Administrative Systems', 2021, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 81, no. 1, pp. 121–136.
27. United Nations, *Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development*, New York: United Nations, 2018.
28. Van Popering-Verkerk, J., Molenveld, A., Duijn, M., van Leeuwen, C. and van Buuren, A., 'A Framework for Governance Capacity: A Broad Perspective on Steering Efforts in Society', 2022, *Administration & Society*, vol. 54, no. 9, pp. 1767–1794.
29. World Bank, 'Worldwide Governance Indicators', n.d., [Online] available at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators>, accessed on October 7, 2023.