



**AALBORG UNIVERSITET**

**From Integration to Sovereignty: The Evolution of Robert Fico's  
Discourse on the European Union**

Master's Thesis: Global Refugee Studies

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# Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of Robert Fico's discourse on the European Union between 2014 and 2024, focusing on how his rhetoric has shifted from pro-European integration to a more Eurosceptic and sovereignty-centered stance. During this period, Slovakia's political landscape has been shaped by significant events, including the refugee crisis, domestic political turmoil, and increasing geopolitical tensions within the EU.

Incorporating evidence from interview and speech this study demonstrates how Fico's language and discourse have evolved to reflect broader regional and international shifts. It argues that his discourse has moved from portraying EU membership as Slovakia's "only viable path" to framing the EU as a challenge to national sovereignty. These concerns are particularly evident in his increasing emphasis on regional alliances, his use of securitization to justify policy decisions, and his strategic reframing of Slovakia's role within the EU.

**Keywords:** Robert Fico, European Union, Discourse Analysis, Shift in Discourse,



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# Introduction

Since Slovakia's accession to the European Union in 2004, its political landscape has undergone significant transformations. Initially perceived as a success story of European integration, Slovakia benefited from economic growth, financial stability, and increased political influence within the EU framework. However, over the past two decades, Slovakia's political discourse regarding the EU has evolved, often reflecting deeper ideological and strategic shifts within its leadership.

At the center of this transformation stands Robert Fico, a dominant figure in Slovak politics and the leader of the social-democratic party Smer-SD. As a four-time prime minister, Fico has played a crucial role in shaping Slovakia's European policy, navigating between pro-European pragmatism and Eurosceptic rhetoric. In this thesis, we will examine two different datasets to analyze how Robert Fico has shifted from a pro-European politician in 2014 to a more Eurosceptic politician in 2024. Therefore, the research question guiding our thesis is as follows:

## **How has Robert Fico's discourse about the European Union shifted between 2014 and 2024?**

Understanding how political rhetoric changes over time is crucial in explaining broader shifts in national and international politics. Political leaders, through discourse, shape public perceptions, justify policy decisions, and redefine national identities. This study aims to critically examine the transformation in Robert Fico's rhetoric between 2014 and 2024, contextualizing it within broader regional and global developments.

The contemporary political climate in Slovakia has been further shaped by ongoing anti-government protests against Fico's administration. Recent demonstrations, fueled by his pro-Russian stance and controversial visit to Moscow in December 2024, highlight a growing divide within the country. Protesters, chanting "Slovakia is not Russia, Slovakia is Europe," have expressed concerns over Fico's suggestions that Slovakia reconsider its commitments to the EU and NATO (AP News, 2024). These events underscore the importance of analyzing his shifting rhetoric, as they reflect broader tensions in Slovakia's political identity and foreign policy direction.

## **Literature review**

This literature review examines the key theoretical frameworks and contextual factors relevant to analyzing Robert Fico's political discourse. It explores how concepts such as Euroscepticism, populism, and securitization have influenced political narratives in Slovakia and the broader European context. These ideologies, which have transitioned from fringe to mainstream, play a critical role in shaping leaders' discourse including Fico's strategic positioning on issues like European integration and national sovereignty.

### **Eurosceptic discourse**

Discourse has a role in shaping political narratives, policy-making, and national identity, and the attention given to this topic has increased in contemporary political science. Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) present a framework of discursive institutionalism and emphasize that discourse is not merely seen as a reflection of interests and institutions but as an active driver capable of reconceptualizing interests, reshaping institutions, and reframing cultural norms. This approach is particularly useful for analyzing political speech, as language not only conveys ideas but also engages with the audience. Through this interaction, political rhetoric influences both policy decisions and how the public perceives key issues, shaping opinions and responses over time.

The term Euroscepticism has been discussed and analyzed in both academic and public discourse to understand its origins, evolution, and implications. Jakša's (2023) work presents the normalization of Euroscepticism within mainstream politics. He argues that the rise of Eurosceptic parties, as seen in the UK's Brexit vote and in France, Italy, and the Visegrad Four, illustrates how Euroscepticism has transitioned from fringe movements to significant political forces capable of shaping EU policies and narratives. He highlights the link between Euroscepticism and security concerns. Euroscepticism not only mirrors existing insecurities but also intensifies them across individual, societal, and institutional levels. For example, the economic crisis in Greece showed how Eurosceptic views can increase feelings of uncertainty, weaken trust in institutions, and lead to social unrest. International actors, such as Russia, have often exploited these dynamics by supporting Eurosceptic movements to destabilize EU cohesion and policymaking, further linking Euroscepticism with geopolitical strategies (Jakša, 2023)



This contextualizes Fico's political rhetoric as part of wider regional and European trends, in which Euroscepticism is utilized to reduce social anxieties, criticize EU policies, and demand national sovereignty. Fico's discourse can be understood as part of a broader trend in which politicians manage the conflict between projecting a pro-European image and reacting to domestic concerns, which are frequently accompanied by Eurosceptic narratives.

Matthijs Rooduijn and Stijn van Kessel (2019) explore the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism, specifically how radical right parties often combine populist rhetoric with Eurosceptic views. They describe the EU as a danger to national sovereignty as well as to cultural identity. On the other hand, radical left parties adopt Eurosceptic positions to critique the EU's neoliberal policies, arguing that these policies deepen economic inequality and social differences. This critique allows these parties to resonate with voters who are skeptical about political elites and see the EU as undemocratic and disconnected from national priorities. Additionally, Rooduijn and van Kessel (2019) stress that the overlap between populism and Euroscepticism has profoundly affected European politics. This fusion has disrupted traditional party structures, granting parties more influence and reshaping political debates at both national and EU levels. These ideologies appeal to public dissatisfaction with existing power dynamics and economic frustrations, enabling them to mobilize a diverse voter base.

Their examination of the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism helps to clarify how Fico's rhetoric challenges established political norms. Fico redefines Slovakia's political discussions by blending pro-European and Eurosceptic aspects, portraying himself as a leader who addresses popular problems while promoting the benefits of EU membership. The connection that Rooduijn and van Kessel mention between populism and Euroscepticism is also visible in Fico's discourse and actions within the internal politics of Slovakia. Therefore, to examine this more closely, we will look at the populist discourse in Slovakia in the next chapter.

## **Populism and nationalism**

Robert Fico's political path, along with that of his party Smer-SD, is closely linked to the rise of populism and increasing polarization in Slovak politics. Spáč's (2012) analysis provides an important basis for understanding how Fico has used populist rhetoric to gain significant

influence in Slovakia's political landscape. Spáč points out that Smer-SD's populist discourse played a key role in its initial success, as it portrayed the party as a leader of ordinary people against corrupt elites. Fico's political appeal is strongly connected to Slovak identity, often positioning his party as the defender of "real Slovaks" against external pressures.

Antal (2023) elaborates on this and argues that Fico's populism has evolved following the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe. Initially, his party adopted a generally pro-European stance, albeit with some criticism. However, Fico shifted to a strongly Eurosceptic position, accusing the EU of dictating refugee policies to Slovakia. His rhetoric depicted refugees as serious threats to Slovak culture and security, fueling public fears of foreign threats to cultural identity and the economy. While framed within a left-wing populist narrative, Fico's discourse also incorporates strong nationalist elements, particularly regarding Slovakia's relationship with the EU and the migrant crisis. This dual strategy enabled him to resonate with working-class voters concerned about economic fairness, as well as nationalist groups focused on safeguarding Slovak identity and sovereignty.

Marušiak's (2021) research also elaborates on Fico's transformative process. He highlights how Fico capitalized on national identity and cultural conservatism to align with the growing anti-liberal and Eurosceptic trends in Central Europe. While Smer-SD began as a pragmatic and centrist-populist party, it gradually shifted toward a nationalist and culturally conservative platform, particularly after 2015. Fico's strategic framing of Slovakia's position vis-à-vis the EU reflected a selective engagement with Europeanization, promoting economic benefits while rejecting cultural and normative integration. At the same time, Fico frequently criticized EU sanctions on Russia, arguing that these measures harmed Slovakia's economic interests. His rhetoric portrayed Slovakia as a potential bridge between East and West, emphasizing pragmatic relations with Russia while questioning the EU's strategic direction.

These studies provide a solid foundation for understanding Robert Fico's discourse. Spáč (2012) highlights how Smer-SD's populist rhetoric initially positioned the party as a defender of "ordinary people" against corrupt elites. Antal (2023) identifies the 2015 refugee crisis as a turning point, marking Fico's shift from a pro-European stance to stronger Euroscepticism and nationalism. Our research contributes to this discussion by examining specific rhetorical shifts through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Specifically, we will focus on the differences in his

discourse between 2014 and 2024. With the application of the theory of securitization, we will examine topics such as nationalism, populism, and his shift in discourse toward the European Union.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

In the following chapter, we will introduce the theoretical and methodological framework in our thesis. It focuses on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical approach, together with securitization theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School, which will complement the analysis by exploring how discourse constructs security threats and legitimizes political actions. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the evolution of Robert Fico's rhetoric on the European Union between 2014 and 2024. Finally, the research design and methodological choices will be presented, detailing how these theories will be applied to the selected texts together with the limitations of our thesis.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a set of theories and methodologies for empirical research, emphasizing the role of discourse in reflecting, reinforcing, and shaping social power, inequality, and dominance across various spheres of society. In this thesis, we will employ Norman Fairclough's CDA framework alongside securitization theory to explore how language constructs new realities and influences Robert Fico's rhetoric.

Fairclough's approach to CDA is primarily text-centered but also examines the connection between text and societal and cultural processes. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining textual and social analyses. Discourse, in his view, is both "constitutive and constituted," meaning that it plays a role in creating social realities and structures (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This means that discourse has the power to change, create, and transform social realities, and at the same time, discourse does not exist in a vacuum but is shaped by existing practices, structures, or norms. This shows how discourse and society are interconnected: while discourse shapes society, society also shapes discourse.

Fairclough defines discourse in three keyways:

1. Discourse as language use in social practice – This perspective sees language not just as a communication tool but as a force that both shapes and is shaped by society. It emphasizes the role of language in constructing social realities, demonstrating how our language influences and is influenced by social practices and structures.
2. Discourse as the type of language used in specific fields – Here, discourse refers to the specialized language used in particular contexts, such as political discourse.
3. Discourse as a particular way of speaking – This refers to the specific forms of language used to convey particular viewpoints or worldviews (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

To guide analysis, Fairclough proposes a three-dimensional model, which suggests that communicative events consist of three interconnected dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. Texts can be either written or oral, with oral texts being purely spoken, such as in radio broadcasts, or a combination of spoken and visual elements, as seen in television. Discursive practice looks at how texts are created using existing ideas and how audiences interpret them based on their knowledge. This dimension links the text to social practice. The social practice dimension looks at how texts contribute to either the reinforcement or transformation of broader societal structures, particularly in terms of power and dominance (Rear, 2013).

Wording plays a significant role in Fairclough's approach. Fairclough suggests that the act of selecting words is an intentional and dynamic process, where specific terms are chosen to describe a concept or experience, thereby shaping how it is perceived by others. These linguistic choices reflect the speaker's perspective and have the potential to influence the interpretation and understanding of ideas or events (Fairclough, 1992). For example, referring to the media as the "mainstream media" versus "elite propaganda" shapes whether it is seen as a neutral source or a manipulative entity serving the elite.

Fairclough also draws attention to the concept of "meaning potential," where words acquire a range of meanings based on their usage across contexts. This potential is shaped by social and cultural contestation, making it essential to explore how meanings shift within different discursive practices. For instance, Fico's shift from pro-European rhetoric in earlier years to a more Eastern-oriented narrative reflects the evolution of wording and its alignment with changing political contexts (Fairclough, 1992). This is particularly important when analyzing shifts in

political discourse and explaining how these changes were shaped by broader social and cultural contexts. For example, highlighting how Robert Fico presented the EU in 2014 as “a prosperous ally” or “the only viable path for Slovakia,” while in 2024 these words are replaced by “sovereignty” or “the need for balance between East and West.”

Metaphors, like words, frame how we conceptualize abstract ideas. They help us understand complex phenomena by linking them to more familiar, tangible experiences. In doing so, metaphors shape the way we perceive, interpret, and engage with various issues, influencing our understanding of reality and framing how we think about social or political topics (Fairclough, 1992).

Another important aspect of CDA is intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Intertextuality is the idea that all communication is influenced by and draws upon previous communication. This means that whenever we communicate, we are using words, ideas, or structures that others have used before. It shows how texts are interconnected, forming a "chain" of references and influences from past to present. This places texts in historical and social contexts, demonstrating how communication reflects and contributes to societal development (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Interdiscursivity is a form of intertextuality and refers to the combination or articulation of different discourses and genres within a single communicative event. For example, a political speech may integrate elements of economic, cultural, and legal discourses to construct its message (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Fairclough argues that “intertextuality and interdiscursivity can contribute either to the reproduction or the challenging of the established status quo” (Rear, 2013, p. 21).

When discourses are used in traditional or expected ways, they tend to uphold the existing framework of communication and power relationships, often referred to as the dominant discourse. This approach helps maintain societal norms and structures, reinforcing established hierarchies, practices, and belief systems without disruption. However, when discourses are combined in novel or unconventional ways, they can create new or hybrid forms of communication. These innovative blends of different discursive elements can disrupt the dominant discourse by challenging prevailing power structures or ideologies, potentially driving change in societal or organizational systems (Rear, 2013).

## **Copenhagen School of Securitization**

The Copenhagen School is closely tied to the establishment of the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI), which was founded in 1985. This institute primarily addressed issues related to peace and security within a transforming global context and became associated with prominent figures like Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, who are considered key contributors to the school's development. Through their works, they offered innovative perspectives on security and its broader environment. The term "Copenhagen School" originated from Bill McSweeney, a prominent critic of this approach, who coined it in his critique of the school's theories and concepts (McSweeney, 1996).

Emerging during the post-Cold War era, the Copenhagen School contributed to ongoing debates in security studies regarding the discipline's future trajectory. Traditionalists adhered to classical frameworks, while others advocated for a broader and more inclusive scope, with the Copenhagen School aligning with the latter. This approach expanded the focus of security studies beyond the state to include individuals and the international community. Additionally, it moved beyond a predominantly military-focused view by introducing four other sectors of security: political, societal, economic, and environmental (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

Since the 1990s, securitization has become a key concept in security studies, questioning traditional approaches grounded in military and realist perspectives. In recent years, the theory and the Copenhagen School have gained growing importance among scholars focused on expanding the scope of security.

“The securitisation framework aligns with the constructivist approach, committing to the discursive and linguistic turn in International Relations and security studies. It builds upon the notion that ‘language is not only concerned with what is ‘out there,’ as realists and neorealists assume, but is also constitutive of the social reality it describes’” (Stępką, 2022).

Securitization theory redefines security as a construct that includes the performative dynamics of speech and discourse, in addition to material threats. The idea defines securitization as the process of portraying a problem as an existential threat that must be addressed with extraordinary

measures. Once something is framed as an existential threat, it is then viewed as so urgent that extraordinary measures are seen as necessary to address it.

At the core of this process is the idea of the "speech act," in which expressing a threat alters its standing in political and social discourse. For example, when a leader declares that something is a "threat to national security," this act of naming it as a threat can change its status within political and social discourse. In this way, speech acts do not just describe reality; they help create and define it. This means that language actively creates reality rather than just describing it, transforming difficulties into perceived dangers through public articulation (Stritzel, 2007).

This idea is based on John L. Austin's concept of performative utterances, which holds that language does more than just carry information; it also causes change in the world. For example, by describing something as a danger, a leader might create the impression that extreme measures are required, even if the threat is not actual. In this approach, securitization emphasizes how speech impacts political reality, with the ability to turn a problem into a security threat requiring a quick response (Stritzel, 2007).

The Copenhagen School identifies three core components essential to the securitization process:

1. Speech Act: The articulation that frames an issue as a security threat.
2. Securitizing Actor: The individual or entity performing the securitization.
3. Audience: The group or community whose acceptance of the securitizing narrative determines its success (Stritzel, 2007).

The process of securitization occurs when an actor effectively portrays an existential threat as both urgent and a top priority, thereby circumventing established rules and norms. When this framing is accepted and supported by the audience, securitization can be successful. However, it is important to emphasize that the securitizing actor's efforts alone do not ensure success. The validation depends on the audience's acceptance of the actor's narrative. In this dynamic, the securitizing actor holds a primary role due to their societal influence and standing. Their authority allows them to construct and declare a particular issue as a threat, making the threat credible and recognized through the act of public declaration (Dulebová & Štefančík, 2017).

The nature of the threat being securitized is also crucial, as it can either support or hinder the process. Equally important are the rhetorical strategies used by the actor, such as emotionally charged language, repeated metaphors, exaggeration, and the use of colloquial or non-standard expressions (Dulebová & Štefančík, 2017).

## **Research design**

**Research question: How has Robert Fico's discourse about the European Union shifted between 2014 and 2024?**

In this thesis, we will explore how Robert Fico's rhetoric regarding the European Union has evolved over the past decade. By examining this research question, we aim to understand how Fico's discourse toward the European Union has changed from 2014 to 2024, reflecting shifts in his political positioning. This investigation will provide insights into how Fico's use of language reflects and influences political and social realities, particularly in the context of Slovakia's evolving role within the European Union.

To explore the research question in depth, we will use both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Securitization Theory. Both share a foundational understanding of the constitutive power of language in shaping social and political realities. The synthesis of CDA and Securitization Theory provides a framework to analyze Fico's rhetoric at both textual and societal levels, with a particular emphasis on identifying and explaining these discursive changes.

Both approaches share a focus on the power of language to construct realities. CDA explores the linguistic and structural components of Fico's rhetoric, while Securitization Theory highlights how this rhetoric functions to construct perceived security threats.

In this thesis, the textual analysis includes Robert Fico's interview in 2014 and his speech in 2024. The discursive practice dimension examines how Fico's rhetoric regarding the European Union is produced, distributed, and consumed within Slovakia's media and political landscape during these two periods. Finally, the social practice component will be covered before the analysis of each speech, focusing on Fico's first period in government, starting in 2006, when Slovakia entered the Eurozone, as well as the developments between 2014 and 2024. This will provide a more concrete context for the analysis and the changes that occurred during these years.



For data to be analyzed, we will examine two distinct speeches delivered at two separate points in time, both marking anniversaries of Slovakia's membership in the European Union. The first dataset consists of an interview featuring Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda on Slovak National Television, commemorating the 10th anniversary of Slovakia's accession to the EU. The second dataset is a speech delivered by Robert Fico in 2024, during the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of Slovakia's EU membership. These two media sources will serve as the main datasets for analysis.

First, the analysis will focus on the semiotic dimensions of the discourse, examining elements that construct meaning within each speech. At the same time, it will situate these speeches within their respective political and social contexts, exploring how the surrounding circumstances influenced the discourse and how the speeches, in turn, reflected or responded to those contexts.

## **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge multiple limitations within our study. First, in our study we use two key primary datasets, Fico's 2014 interview and his 2024 speech. These sources were selected due to their significance in marking Slovakia's EU membership milestones, but they do not encompass the full extent of Fico's discourse over the decade. Other forms of communication, such as parliamentary debates, social media statements, and interviews with international media would provide additional context.

This thesis is also limited by the absence of audience reception analysis. While the study examines the content, structure, and ideological implications of Fico's discourse, it does not cover how different segments of the Slovak public, political elites, European institutions or other international actors have responded to these shifts.

Another limitation relates to the geopolitical and contextual factors influencing Fico's discourse. While the analysis incorporates major political events to a certain level, due to the lack of time, the amount of context is limited.

## **Analysis**

In this analytical section, we will examine two key datasets: Robert Fico's 2014 interview and his 2024 speech. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the framework of securitization, we will explore how Fico's rhetoric has changed over time. The analysis will center on his portrayal of the European Union in 2014, a decade after Slovakia's accession, and the significant shifts in his discourse evident ten years later in 2024.

To structure the analysis, this chapter will be divided into two sections, each dedicated to one of the speeches under study. For each speech, the analysis will begin by contextualizing the circumstances and setting in which the speech was delivered and presenting the key elements and events that occurred during the periods from 2006 to 2014 and from 2014 to 2024 for the second speech. Following the discursive practice for each speech, the focus will shift to a detailed examination of the textual elements. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an analysis of the changes in Fico's discourse between 2014 and 2024.

## **Events between 2006 and 2014**

To provide a comprehensive context, the following chapter will explore the key events and developments in Slovakia and the European Union between 2006 and 2014. This eight-year period encompasses Robert Fico's first tenure as prime minister, leading his political party, Direction – Social Democrats (Smer–SD), from 2006 to 2010. After losing the 2010 election, a coalition government was formed, but it ultimately collapsed, triggering early elections in 2012. In those elections, Fico made a striking political comeback, securing an overwhelming 44.41% of the vote, which allowed Smer–SD to form Slovakia's first single-party government since the country gained independence (Robert Schuman Foundation, 2012).

Particular attention will be given to how these events influenced Fico's political discourse and strategies, setting the stage for a detailed discourse analysis of the 2014 interview in subsequent sections. This context will help shed light on the factors contributing to Fico's discourse and its broader implications for Slovakia's position in the European political arena.

## **Economic Transition and Euro Adoption**

One of the most important elements of Fico's first term was Slovakia's entry into the Eurozone and the transition from the Slovak crown to the euro. Discussions about joining the Eurozone began shortly after Slovakia became a member of the European Union, and the country officially adopted the euro in 2009.

For many Slovaks and politicians, adopting the euro was seen as a natural progression toward deeper European integration. Historically, Slovakia had been a minority within larger entities like the Austro-Hungarian Empire and later Czechoslovakia. After gaining independence in 1993, joining a union where Slovakia could stand as an equal alongside wealthier European countries represented a significant opportunity. The scholarly and intellectual community also largely supported the adoption of the new currency, viewing it as a pathway to enhanced financial stability and economic prosperity (Dandashly & Verdun, 2015).

Following its adoption, the euro brought Slovakia numerous benefits. The influx of foreign investments and entrepreneurship was facilitated, as the euro was a much more stable currency compared to the Slovak crown. Additionally, the euro removed currency risk in dealings with major trade partners within the Eurozone. Previously, fluctuations in the Slovak koruna exchange rate could create uncertainty, complicating financial planning and budgeting. All of this increased trade and investment flows, resulting in economic growth. For citizens, it involved converting savings and prices to the new currency and adapting to the use of new banknotes and coins. Despite initial concerns, the euro quickly became an integral part of everyday life in Slovakia (Vpeniaze.sk, 2009).

"I am convinced that the introduction of the euro is an unparalleled historical achievement for the Slovak Republic, and I am very proud that the adoption of the euro will be primarily associated with the government of the Slovak Republic, of which I am the prime minister," said Fico during his speech at a conference dedicated to the first year of the euro in Slovakia, organized by the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia in cooperation with the National Bank of Slovakia.

## **Rise of Populism and Shifts in Political Landscape**

While Slovakia's entry into the Eurozone was shaped by both foreign policy considerations and national political dynamics, the focus now shifts more specifically to internal politics under

Robert Fico's leadership. During his first term, Fico marked a departure from the previous neoliberal reforms. He strongly criticized the policies implemented by his predecessor, Mikuláš Dzurinda, and instead advocated for a more socially focused state that emphasized social cohesion. He positioned himself as an opponent of neoliberal elites. Key targets of his criticism included the flat tax system and extensive privatization, which he portrayed as socially inequitable. These policies, according to Fico, led to public dissatisfaction, particularly among vulnerable groups (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012).

As a response, Fico's government introduced state-oriented policies in critical sectors like healthcare and energy and reinforced these policies with legislative changes, such as a ban on private health insurers distributing profits to shareholders or amendments to the Highway Act, which allowed for land expropriation. His administration tightly controlled energy prices and restricted the influence of foreign energy companies, framing these measures as a defense of Slovak interests against external exploitation. At the same time, Fico prioritized high-visibility welfare measures, such as Christmas bonuses for pensioners and allowances for childbirth. While these measures were symbolic, they significantly boosted Fico's popularity (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012).

Fico's politics were also intertwined with populist rhetoric and corruption. Besides the laws that targeted specific populations, there were several controversial laws introduced as well. In 2008, Fico enacted a controversial Press Act, which granted politicians an automatic "right of reply" in the media as a means to suppress critical reporting. The act introduced a degree of censorship, as media outlets and journalists faced legal repercussions and financial penalties for critical reporting. The act faced significant criticism, both internationally and domestically. Besides that, Fico and other government members frequently attacked certain media outlets verbally, accusing them of bias and undermining their credibility (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012).

This act also contributed to the rise of national populism, combining traditional populist appeals with strong ethnic and nationalist undertones. Slovak populist leaders often reinterpreted national history to emphasize the country's struggle for sovereignty and independence. Historical narratives were frequently mythologized to promote a sense of national pride and solidarity. In his discourse, Fico introduced the term "Old Slovaks", referencing King Svatopluk, who ruled over the Great Moravian Empire, claiming that while Slovakia had a great history, other states

had nothing. His efforts to mythologize certain historical figures also served as a tool to attack journalists who criticized his government, portraying them as unpatriotic or anti-Slovak (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová, 2008).

Corruption had deep historical roots in Slovakia long before Fico's first government. However, rather than tackling the issue effectively, Fico's administration allowed it to persist and even exacerbated the problem. Public procurement became synonymous with corruption under Fico's leadership. Contracts were often awarded to politically connected companies, undermining transparency and fairness. Corruption extended into the judiciary, where judges were accused of accepting bribes and engaging in case manipulation. The failure to address major corruption cases effectively further highlighted systemic weaknesses. Scandals such as the emissions quota case were inadequately investigated or abandoned altogether, reflecting a lack of political will to hold powerful individuals accountable.

Public trust in democratic institutions eroded significantly, with surveys indicating that only 29% of Slovaks trusted the judiciary, making it one of the least credible institutions in the country (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012). Corruption also weakened governance, undermining the rule of law and democratic accountability. On the international stage, repeated scandals damaged Slovakia's reputation, discouraging foreign investment and raising concerns within the European Union about the country's commitment to transparency and rule-of-law standards (ibid.).

## **Global Financial Crisis**

As highlighted in the previous chapter, during his first term, Fico strongly emphasized the strategic importance of adopting the euro, a topic particularly important in the context of the 2008 global financial crisis. Slovakia's transition from the Slovak koruna to the euro on January 1, 2009, was portrayed by Fico as a crucial move to safeguard the nation's economy during turbulent times (SME.sk, 2008).

The euro adoption was promoted as a key measure to bolster Slovakia's economic stability amid the global downturn. He argued that joining the Eurozone would help Slovakia avoid the severe economic shocks that non-Eurozone EU countries experienced. "Turmoil on global financial markets magnified the positive effects of adopting the single European currency," Fico stated in

an interview (Reuters, 2008). According to him, the euro provided economic resilience by eliminating exchange rate volatility and increasing investor confidence (ibid.).

Furthermore, the Prime Minister noted that the financial crisis underscored the benefits of euro adoption and suggested that the move was even more advantageous than previously anticipated. "Today we perceive the introduction of the euro as even more beneficial than we saw it a few months ago," he remarked (ibid.). His government framed the transition as a strategic economic decision rather than merely a symbolic step toward European integration (Pravda.sk, 2008).

Economic analysts have pointed out that Slovakia's entry into the Eurozone in January 2009 contributed to its financial stability. The adoption of the euro resulted in a relatively fast recovery from the global financial crisis, especially compared to some neighboring countries. Additionally, being part of the Eurozone provided Slovakia with access to European financial mechanisms that mitigated the crisis's economic effects (BRIDGE Network, 2021).

## **Interview with Robert Fico in 2014**

The interview with Robert Fico in 2014 offers insight into Slovakia's evolving relationship with the European Union. Marking a decade since the country's accession, the dialogue unfolds against a backdrop of both celebration and critical reflection. At this juncture, Slovakia had been transformed by its integration into the EU, grappling with the dual forces of national identity and broader European unity. This conversation provides a valuable opportunity to explore the interplay between political leadership, public perception, and Slovakia's strategic positioning within the EU. As Fico articulates his vision for the country's future in an increasingly interconnected Europe, the discussion also raises pressing questions about sovereignty, economic adaptation, and the broader trajectory of European integration.

## **Discursive practice**

This interview took place on May 1st, marking the 10th anniversary of Slovakia's official accession to the European Union as well as Labor Day. The discussion featured two prominent political figures: Robert Fico, who was serving as the Prime Minister of Slovakia at the time and

had also been Prime Minister when Slovakia entered the Eurozone, and Mikuláš Dzurinda, a former Prime Minister who had been in office during Slovakia's entry into the EU.

The purpose of the interview was to reflect on the decade since Slovakia joined the EU, analyzing the changes the country experienced—both positive and negative—and assessing the impact of EU membership on Slovakia's development. Topics of discussion included economic growth, social transformations, and the political implications of being part of the EU. The interview was broadcast on Jednotka, a generalist channel operated by Slovak Television and Radio (RTVS). The program offered viewers an opportunity to engage with critical perspectives on Slovakia's integration into the European Union and its evolving relationship with the bloc over the past decade.

The discussion was moderated by Branislav Dobšínský, a well-known Slovak journalist. The interview took place in the iconic Slovak Radio building, a significant venue symbolizing the nation's commitment to public discourse and information dissemination. The setting of the room was both formal and symbolic, emphasizing the occasion's importance. Three European Union flags were prominently displayed, underscoring Slovakia's membership in the EU as the central theme of the discussion. A round table was positioned at the center of the room, fostering an atmosphere of equality and open dialogue among the three participants.

### **A Successful story**

The conversation began with an opening question addressed to both participants: "What has been the story of Slovakia over the past ten years?"

Fico begins the discussion by wishing every Slovak citizen a happy Labor Day, strategically using this opening to establish a personal connection with the audience. By acknowledging the dual significance of the day, as both a public holiday and the anniversary of Slovakia's EU accession, Fico frames himself as a leader who follows national traditions and unity, reinforcing his image as a relatable and inclusive figure. This opening sets a tone of connection with the audience, acknowledging the significance of May 1st as both a public holiday and the anniversary of Slovakia's accession to the European Union (RTVS, 2014, 1:03).

Moving to the moderator's question, Fico reflects on the topic by suggesting that the historical and political nuances of Slovakia's past ten years in the EU are best analyzed by political scientists and historians. "I would leave the events that happened 10 years ago to historians and political scientists... 10 years of Slovakia in the EU, an extraordinarily successful story." However, as an active politician, he briefly shares his perspective, characterizing Slovakia's membership in the EU as a "success story" (RTVS, 2014, 1:28). He then points out Slovakia's remarkable achievements within the EU, claiming that it stands out as the member state that has benefited the most among the countries that joined the Union during the 2004 enlargement (RTVS, 2014, 1:50).

As mentioned in our methodology, CDA highlights how discourse constructs social and political identities. From this brief introduction, it is evident that Robert Fico positions himself as a politician who prioritizes the present and its challenges over delving into historical retrospectives. Rather than engaging in a detailed examination of past events, he directs attention to the contemporary realities of Slovakia's membership in the European Union. His emphasis reflects a forward-looking approach, aimed at addressing the current benefits and opportunities derived from EU integration. However, in his previous speeches and public appearances, he frequently invoked historical events to emphasize Slovakia's strength as a nation. In contrast, he now moves away from discussing the past. While he often used certain historical moments as a source of pride for Slovakia, he now focuses instead on showcasing Slovakia's current successes under his leadership and projecting a bright future for the country.

The moderator then poses a question to Fico, asking whether the European Union is progressing in the right direction, referencing challenges such as the Eurozone crisis and the Banking Union. In response, Fico asserts unequivocally that Slovakia's only viable path is continued membership in the EU, emphasizing the importance of being at the core of its integration efforts. He highlights that Eurozone countries are likely to strengthen their cooperation and coordination, and that countries choosing not to be part of the cooperation will be pushed away. Given Slovakia's reliance on Eurozone markets, he argues that it is in the nation's vital interest to actively participate in these integration processes. "It must be our vital interest to be part of the integration processes that exist here and that we cannot stop or significantly influence." (RTVS, 2014, 4:23).



His response clearly positions Slovak participation in the EU as the only option, highlighting the benefits of cooperation and integration. The linguistic focus of CDA explains their implications, and here, he aligns Slovakia's national interests with the larger trajectory of European cooperation, presenting EU membership as indispensable to the country's economic and political future. In his response, he strictly advises that deeper integration is a "vital interest," which shows his assertiveness on this topic.

Fico remarks that the 2008 economic crisis brought significant changes to the European Union, attributing the EU's image at the time to the effects of the crisis. He notes that developments within the EU's internal structures, particularly the establishment of the Banking Union or Eurobonds, would not have occurred without the crisis. Based on this perspective, he expresses confidence that the direction the EU is taking is effective. "We can discuss the direction of the European Union, but I believe it is the only way to survive. The decisions that have been made, for example, to protect the euro and coordinate budgetary and economic policies, are the right ones." (RTVS, 2014, 6:01).

He argues that these changes are essential for the EU to remain competitive on a global scale. As the leader of a strongly pro-European government, he emphasizes his belief that by continuing on this path, Slovakia can achieve substantial benefits and progress (RTVS, 2014, 6:31).

With this statement, Robert Fico demonstrates strong confidence in the European Union and the direction it has taken and highlights its effectiveness in proposing and implementing solutions. By using the metaphor "only way to survive," Fico frames EU directives as a matter of national interest and the only viable path. In other words, pursuing an alternative course of action or attempting to integrate in a different direction could have had profoundly negative consequences for Slovakia. This discourse positions Slovakia as a proactive member state aligning itself with the EU's trajectory of overcoming challenges and solidifying its global competitiveness.

He conveys approval not only of the solutions themselves but also of the broader strategic vision that underpins them. He frames these measures as necessary steps toward ensuring the EU's stability and competitiveness on a global scale. Fico expresses no apprehension about the partial loss of national sovereignty associated with Slovakia's involvement in the Banking Union. He frames it as an essential trade-off for greater collective security and prosperity. His argument

underscores that such changes are not merely acceptable but are crucial for safeguarding Slovakia's well-being and economic interests.

These arguments tie into Fico's broader narrative of EU membership as the "only viable path" for Slovakia, as expressed in other parts of his discourse. It reflects a consistent effort to portray the EU as a stabilizing force and a source of opportunity, framing Slovakia's future as linked to the Union's trajectory.

In his responses, Fico also briefly expresses his appreciation to the other guests, as well as to all political parties, including the opposition. He acknowledges that despite differing values, there is a shared commitment to a pro-European stance in foreign policy. This consensus contributes to stability within Slovakia and its institutions in the eyes of both citizens and the international audience (RTVS, 2014, 7:40)

With this statement, Fico appeals to the entire nation, extending beyond his own supporters while expressing gratitude and respect for opposing political parties. This approach positions him as a leader who is cooperative, respectful, and focused on the broader national interest.

He emphasizes that a pro-European outlook is not solely his personal stance but reflects the collective will of the Slovak people. He projects an image of national unity and shared purpose that transcends political divides, presenting Slovakia as a stable and cohesive country on the international stage.

Following the interview, the moderator asks Fico for his perspective on the future structure of the European Union, questioning whether it might evolve into a centralized "superstate" or move in the opposite direction toward fragmentation and a smaller EU. Fico speculates that the key issue is whether member states can balance preserving their national interests while remaining pro-European and demonstrating a commitment to cooperation. He then poses the question of whether the Schengen Agreement compromised Slovakia's sovereignty, answering himself by affirming that it did but highlighting that no one complains because its benefits are clear and shared by all. He applies the same reasoning to the adoption of the euro.

"Schengen was an intervention in state sovereignty, and does anyone complain today when crossing the border from Slovakia to Poland, Austria, or Hungary? The same can be said about

the euro. Changing the currency is a certain intervention into the sovereignty of the state... and does anyone complain that we adopted the euro?" (RTVS, 2014, 13:36).

However, he firmly establishes a boundary, asserting that there are fundamental issues in which member states must retain full decision-making authority and that the EU should not interfere in these matters. He uses budget policy as an example, emphasizing that while coordination and the exchange of experiences are acceptable, directives imposed by Brussels are not (RTVS, 2014, 14:20).

Fico strikes a balance between supporting European integration and defending national sovereignty in his response. He acknowledges that agreements like the Schengen Agreement and euro adoption "compromised Slovakia's sovereignty," but he frames these as calculated trade-offs with "clear benefits" that enhance security and prosperity. By admitting that sovereignty is "compromised" through Schengen and the euro, Fico implicitly securitizes these decisions, framing them as calculated risks that deliver greater collective security and economic stability. He emphasizes the "clear benefits" as evidence that these compromises are justified and necessary.

At the same time, Fico delineates limits to EU influence, asserting that certain fundamental issues must remain under the exclusive authority of member states. This establishment of boundaries reflects a firm commitment to safeguarding Slovakia's sovereignty in critical areas, even as the country remains a committed member of the EU. It shows both a defense of national decision-making and a reassurance to his audience that Slovakia retains control over its core interests within the EU framework.

In response to a question posed by the moderator to another guest about the concept of a two-speed European Union, Fico offers his perspective. He notes that there are instances when Eurozone countries hold discussions, and non-Eurozone countries attempt to participate, which is occasionally met with resistance from larger Eurozone nations. Fico speculates that stricter rules may emerge, driven by "more disciplined states," with increasing pressure to enforce compliance. He suggests that countries following these rules will benefit significantly greater benefits from cooperation and integration compared to those that do not. "I feel the dynamism in the development of the European Union, but at the same time, I believe that Slovakia will be able to protect its interests within this dynamism, of course, also in cooperation with regional groups like

the V4." (RTVS, 2014, 18:41) He also highlights the importance of the Visegrad Four (V4) alliance, emphasizing that as a united bloc, it holds considerably more influence than Slovakia could achieve on its own. "Before the European Council, there are meetings of the V4 prime ministers where we coordinate our positions, and then one of us stands up and says that we speak on behalf of 60 million people, which carries a different weight." (RTVS, 2014, 19:50)

Fico predicts the imposition of additional rules within the European Union and implicitly signals Slovakia's willingness to adhere to these regulations to secure greater benefits. He reiterates that the EU remains a vital partner for Slovakia, emphasizing a proactive commitment to shared values and collective objectives as part of a unified framework. his narrative securitizes compliance by framing adherence to EU rules as essential for safeguarding Slovakia's national security and economic prosperity. By presenting compliance as critical to avoiding marginalization, Fico positions EU alignment not merely as a pragmatic choice but as a fundamental strategy to ensure stability and long-term development in a globalized context. He implies that noncompliance could result in exclusion and constructs a clear dichotomy: inclusion ensures progress and prosperity, while exclusion risks diminished influence and economic setbacks. Furthermore, Fico underscores the strategic importance of the Visegrad Four alliance as a means of safeguarding against marginalization within the EU. While Slovakia, as a smaller state, has limited influence on its own, the combined strength of the V4 nations, representing a population of 60 million, positions Slovakia on significantly firmer ground, raising its chances to influence EU policies and decisions. This framing prioritizes regional cooperation, portraying the V4 as a strategic tool to mitigate Slovakia's smaller geopolitical stature. Fico constructs regional unity as essential for Slovakia's stability and relevance within the broader EU framework.

The moderator then presents statistics indicating that Slovakia's national economy has grown more slowly compared to other EU countries over the past decade, adding that citizens are increasingly dissatisfied. Fico responds by acknowledging that people tend to assess their situation subjectively, as everyone aspires to better living standards. However, he points out that public discourse is dominated by negativity and bad news, creating a distorted narrative. "An atmosphere of only negative news and negative information is being created... but is it not true that if we compare salaries from 2004 and 2014, there has been a 70% increase? That's simply what the statistics show, but when someone states this publicly, people start laughing because no

one wants to tell people that life in Slovakia isn't easy, yet no one acknowledges that EU membership has been a tremendous success." (RTVS, 2014, 21:42).

While statistics confirm this as fact, he notes that when stated publicly, it is often met with disbelief or laughter. Fico argues that people are reluctant to acknowledge the challenges of life in Slovakia alongside the substantial benefits of EU membership. He highlights that 80% of all public investments in Slovakia are funded by the EU, highlighting the positive impact of membership. Fico urges for a more balanced and optimistic outlook, lamenting the lack of accessible information about these benefits. "It's a shame that we cannot provide Slovakia with the full truth about how things really are with the European Union, because then someone on television says that we contribute more to the budget than we receive, and no one counters that statement." (RTVS, 2014, 22:10).

He criticizes misinformation, such as claims that Slovakia contributes more to EU funds than it receives, which often go unchallenged. He clarifies that from 2014 to 2020, Slovakia will €20 billion from the EU, resulting in a net benefit of approximately €15 billion. (RTVS, 2014, 22:58)

Fico expresses his concern about the dominance of negative narratives and misinformation in public discourse, framing them as misleading. It reflects an attempt to frame the public discourse in a way that emphasizes media as biased. CDA examines how political figures use language to securitize certain issues, presenting them as existential threats that require immediate intervention. Fico is blaming the media or other political actors for focusing on Slovakia's challenges and overlooking its successes. This serves to discredit the prevailing discourse and redirect attention to more favorable aspects of the nation's situation. This redirection shifts focus from economic performance alone to the broader issue of how information shapes public perception. At the same time, he shares a personal anecdote about disbelief in income growth and backing it up with concrete figures, with which Fico strengthens his argument, making it both relatable and credible. Fico briefly acknowledges the difficulties faced by the people of Slovakia. This admission humanizes his argument and prevents it from sounding overly dismissive of people's struggles. However, he frames this acknowledgment as something that is often avoided, suggesting that political discourse selectively ignores challenges while focusing only on negative aspects.

He repeatedly emphasizes the benefits of EU membership to ensure the audience internalizes his message. What is more, Fico frames the negativity in public discourse and the spread of misinformation as a threat to the public's understanding of Slovakia's economic progress and its relationship with the European Union. He constructs these threats as significant enough to jeopardize national cohesion and trust in EU membership, thus warranting immediate attention.

The moderator then shifts to a more pointed question, reminding the audience that Fico was actively involved in the discussions when Slovakia adopted the euro. The moderator asks whether the exchange rate at the time was too strong, potentially causing Slovaks to lose money. In response, Fico defends the decision, asserting that the exchange rate established was a success. "The exchange rate that was negotiated was a success at the time, because when we look at the parameters after the euro was introduced, Slovakia adopted the euro very smoothly. We are often used as an example of a very effective mechanism, so I would consider the exchange rate to have been well-set and I stand by it." (RTVS, 2014, 28:13). Referring to charts and data, he emphasizes that the parameters indicate a smooth transition to the euro, firmly standing by his actions and decisions during that period (RTVS, 2014, 29:18).

The moderator's question about the exchange rate touches on broader economic debates surrounding Slovakia's adoption of the euro and its long-term implications. As outlined in our methodology, CDA helps uncover how political figures construct legitimacy, frame historical narratives, and manage criticism through discourse. In his response, Fico places these concerns within a historical context with data to cover his response, drawing on empirical evidence to create a connection between past policy decisions and present economic stability. By doing so, Fico effectively dismisses any doubts that might cast him as a decision-maker who made a mistake in any angle, portraying himself instead as a responsible leader who made the right choices. He reframes the question, which suggests the exchange rate may have been flawed or harmful from certain perspectives, by shifting the focus to its overall benefits. This approach emphasizes the positive outcomes while sidestepping any potential discussion of the drawbacks.

The moderator follows up with a question referencing Germany, where the adoption of the euro reportedly made life more expensive. Fico uses this opportunity to reassure Slovaks, asserting that the Euro crisis is behind them. "The euro crisis is behind us. In the end, it wasn't really a crisis of the euro—it was a crisis caused by irresponsible countries and their approach to financial

discipline. The euro is a good project, and Slovakia belongs in the Eurozone." (RTVS, 2014, 30:48). Fico reiterates his belief in the euro as a successful project and expresses pride in Slovakia's membership in the Eurozone. Once again, he dismisses any doubts, reassuring Slovaks that the EU is the only viable path forward. He emphasizes that greater integration and fiscal discipline will yield even more benefits, promising to safeguard Slovakia's interests. Fico again brings up the importance of the Visegrad Four alliance, highlighting its role in enhancing Slovakia's credibility and influence on the European stage (RTVS, 2014, 30:48).

Fico's response to the moderator's question reflects a deliberate discourse strategy aimed at reframing the narrative around the "Euro crisis." By asserting, "It wasn't really a crisis of the euro, it was a crisis caused by irresponsible countries and their approach to financial discipline," he shifts the blame away from the structural viability of the euro to the financial mismanagement of individual member states. This reframing achieves two objectives, one he reinforces euro currency position as a stable and credible currency, vital for Slovakia's economic identity and second, Fico implicitly aligns Slovakia with the "responsible" states, contrasting it with the "irresponsible" ones.

Moderator than following the interview ask question about European funds and how effective are we in drawdown of Eurofonds. Fico expresses that these funds are irreplaceable for Slovakia. However, "Discussions are ongoing between us and the European Commission about how to spend these funds most effectively. The European Commission is pushing us to spend money on so-called soft measures, such as retraining and training programs... however, the European Commission does not like that we want to spend money on building critical infrastructure... we must find a balance between what the European Commission demands and our interests." (RTVS, 2014, 38:32).

Fico's rhetoric reflects a broader discourse on the balance between national sovereignty and compliance with EU directives. He is emphasizing the need for balance, which situates him and Slovakia as a cooperative yet independent actor within the EU.

The response also constructs a national identity rooted in pragmatism and self-determination. Fico emphasizes the importance of infrastructure over "soft measures," such as retraining programs, to portray Slovakia's development needs as unique and distinct from EU priorities. The

contrast between “critical infrastructure” and “soft measures” creates a discourse where tangible, visible projects are prioritized as essential for Slovakia’s long-term stability and growth.

At the end of the conversation, Fico emphasizes the importance of participating in the European Parliament elections, urging citizens to vote and with a wish of peaceful rest of the day. (RTVS, 2014, 47:28).

## **Major events between 2014 and 2024**

To provide a comprehensive context, similar to the previous chapter, the following section will examine the key political events and developments in Slovakia and the European Union between 2014 and 2024, focusing on Robert Fico’s evolving political career. This decade marks his return to power in 2012 and his eventual resignation as prime minister in 2018 amid widespread protests and political turmoil. Despite this setback, Fico remained a central figure in Slovak politics, influencing national discourse and the strategic direction of his party, Smer–SD. His political resurgence culminated in the 2023 parliamentary elections, where he secured a return to the premiership, once again reshaping Slovakia’s domestic and foreign policy.

### **Refugee Crisis**

As previously noted, Robert Fico began his second term as prime minister following the early elections in 2012, succeeding Iveta Radičová. He remained a strong proponent of deeper EU integration until the 2015 refugee crisis when he sharply opposed mandatory quotas for refugee relocation. He argued that migrants from the Middle East posed a threat not only to Slovakia’s security but also to its Christian identity. Fico stated "Uncontrolled migration brings the risk of an influx of people with different interests. This influx may also be associated with the arrival of individuals who may have very dangerous interests and are connected to various terrorist organizations." (Tódová, 2015). He also emphasized that Slovakia would only accept Christian migrants, expressing concerns about the integration of Muslims due to the absence of mosques in the country (Terece, 2015). This period marked a significant shift in Fico's political discourse as he increasingly utilized populist and nationalist themes to trigger support and assert Slovakia's sovereignty within the European context. Fico's opposition to the EU's migrant quotas and his emphasis on preserving Slovakia's Christian identity contributed to a broader discourse that



portrayed the EU's migration policies as a threat to national sovereignty. Fico intentionally fostered concerns among Slovaks, suggesting that Brussels was imposing decisions that could undermine Slovakia's autonomy.

### **Assassination of investigative journalist**

One of the most controversial scandals during Fico government was a murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová in their house in 2018. Kuciak was following a mafia group and alleged ties to Slovakian top politicians. Police investigation resulted that the murder was most likely related to his work. The assassination escalated in a mass protest across the whole country. Slovaks were demanding accountability and systemic change following the corruption of the highest politicians (Boffey, 2018). As a response to the protests, Fico resigned as a prime minister. However, Fico shifted the blame amid the chaos by claiming that foreigners were meddling in Slovakia's domestic issues. He explicitly accused George Soros, a Hungarian American philanthropist, of planning the overthrow of the Slovak government, an accusation that is similar to many Russian misinformation methods. A representative for Soros refuted these claims, stating that Soros was not involved in the political events in Slovakia. This event has shed a bad light on Fico and his political party, which resulted in his loss in the next government elections in 2020.

### **Fico's stance on Ukraine and pro-Russian discourse post-election**

Following the onset of the invasion, Fico articulated a position that denounced Russia's military actions as a "gross violation of international law" while framing the conflict as a power struggle between the United States and Russia rather than a war involving Ukraine itself (Fico 1, 2023). Additionally, he emphasized Slovakia's non-involvement, stating that "Slovakia has no reason to feel threatened" and opposing actions that could escalate regional tensions, particularly criticizing then-President Zuzana Čaputová foreign policy decisions regarding military cooperation with the United States (ibid.).

A critical component of Fico's discourse has been his opposition to economic sanctions against Russia. He contends that such measures harm Slovakia more than Russia itself, aligning with narratives that question the effectiveness of Western policies. Citing British media articles, he

agrees that sanctions had failed, reinforcing claims that Western economic strategies disproportionately affected EU member states rather than undermining Russia's geopolitical position (Fedičová, 2022). This argument has been central to his broader political messaging, positioning himself as a defender of Slovakia's economic sovereignty against perceived external pressures.

Fico's discourse intensified during Slovakia's 2023 parliamentary elections, where his party, Smer-SD, campaigned on three fundamental principles regarding Ukraine: opposition to the prolongation of the conflict, a commitment to vetoing Ukraine's NATO membership, and the cessation of military aid to Ukraine (Biró, 2023). After assuming office, his government enacted policies to halt state-provided military assistance to Ukraine, though he later clarified that private Slovak arms manufacturers could continue exports independently. "If a company wants to produce weapons and supply them somewhere, of course, nobody will prevent that," he explained. This shift contradicted his pre-election claims that "not a single bullet" would be sent to Ukraine under his administration (HNonline, 2023).

Furthermore, Fico has consistently emphasized Slovakia's humanitarian role, advocating for aid in the form of medical supplies and winter survival equipment rather than weaponry. He has also sought to present Slovakia as a neutral actor, willing to facilitate peace negotiations rather than exacerbating hostilities (Fico 2, 2023). This positioning served to balance domestic political pressures with Slovakia's commitments as an EU and NATO member state.

Despite these diplomatic efforts, Fico's statements have frequently echoed narratives associated with Russian propaganda. In a press conference, he questioned, "Why should we adopt the rhetoric of the Western world at all times? Slovakia is a sovereign state that is historically linked to the nations that once formed the former Soviet Union." (Fico 3, 2023). This statement, alongside his skepticism toward media coverage of the war, aligned with a broader Euroskeptic and nationalist discourse that characterizes much of his political strategy.

Fico's engagement with Russian officials has further reinforced perceptions of a pro-Russian orientation. In a parliamentary speech, he acknowledged meeting with the Russian ambassador to Slovakia, "I was straightforward and told him that Russian Federation had breached international law but that does not mean I cannot meet with Russian diplomats and shake their hand." (Fico 4, 2023).

## **Speech by Robert Fico in 2024**

On the 20th anniversary of Slovakia's accession to the European Union, Robert Fico delivered a televised address reflecting on the country's evolving role within the EU and its broader geopolitical context. A decade after presenting the EU as Slovakia's only viable path, Fico now positions the nation at a critical crossroads. During this time, Slovakia has faced significant challenges, including the rise of populist narratives, deep polarization among its citizens, and growing scepticism toward EU institutions from one segment of the population, while others call for Fico's resignation. At the same time, the European Union has been tested by major challenges such as the aftermath of Brexit and, most notably, the ongoing Ukraine conflict, which has intensified debates over energy security and migration policy.

### **Discursive practice**

The speech was delivered on May 1, 2024, a day of dual significance in Slovakia, marking both the anniversary of the country's accession to the European Union and the celebration of Labor Day. To honor the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Slovak government organized a grand Gala Night, featuring a program that showcased a variety of artistic performances, culminating in the prestigious Alexander Dubček State Award ceremony. The evening took place in a colorful and elegant setting, blending cultural celebration and political thought.

Robert Fico's speech was delivered as a part of the evening's program. The event was attended by numerous prominent figures from Slovakia's political landscape, including current officials as well as notable former representatives, such as a former prime minister and a former president.

The venue is designed to convey a sense of significance and national pride. At the center of the stage, Fico stands as the focal point of the event. Behind him, a large orchestral ensemble is prominently positioned, adding a formal and ceremonial tone to the occasion. An illuminated electronic display is also present, with a statement "20 Years in the European Union,". The design incorporates the EU's star emblem, integrated with the Slovak flag within the star, symbolizing Slovakia's intertwined identity and journey within the European Union.

## **From integration to opposition**

Fico's speech begins with a greeting to the entire nation of Slovakia and a wish for a wonderful May 1st evening. He also greets all the participants on the gala evening, referencing them as he expresses his intention to ask both active and former politicians to help him find the right words for his speech so as not to spoil the evening. He then continues by congratulating the Slovak Republic on May 1st.

"This is a national holiday, Labor Day, and I want to thank all employers for creating jobs, all Slovaks who are working, or those who are already enjoying their well-deserved rest, for the values they have created for this country." (YouTube, 2024 2024, 1:10).

Fico's speech begins with an inclusive greeting to all Slovaks, establishing his authority and presenting himself as a leader of all citizens. To further highlight his consideration for Slovakia, he humorously asks previous political leaders to help him with his speech. However, what stands out is his deliberate omission of any reference to the European Union, despite the gala night's primary purpose being the celebration of Slovakia's EU membership. Rather than acknowledging this milestone, Fico redirects attention to the working class and business owners, expressing gratitude for their contributions to the nation's success.

This shift in focus suggests a populist appeal, where he prioritizes a nationalist economic narrative over discussions of European integration. As Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis emphasizes, wording is never neutral but plays a crucial role in shaping discourse and meaning. Here, Fico's deliberate use of positive and unifying language reflects a discursive strategy designed to foster national solidarity.

He continues by stating that it is expected of him to mention figures and statistics about how the EU has helped Slovakia. "I believe this is a two-sided relationship, but we can conclude that Slovakia's membership in the Union has helped it immensely." (YouTube, 2024 2024, 1:53).

Fico's discourse serves as a reflection of his current political orientation and strategic intentions. While he acknowledges that Slovakia has gained from its EU membership, he simultaneously creates a sense of distance from the Union. He deliberately distance from providing information about positive aspects and frames it as being obligated to do so. Instead, he highlights that Slovakia is not only a beneficiary in this union, but also a contributor emphasizing that Slovakia

gives as much as receives. This rhetorical shift signals a discursive move toward a sovereignty-focused narrative, where Slovakia's role in the EU is no longer framed through the lens of reliance but rather as an equal partner.

He continues by recalling the years 2003 and 2004 to emphasize "what is missing in Slovak politics today, and that is consensus on fundamental issues." (YouTube, 2024 2024, 2:07). He references these years to highlight that, despite differing opinions in politics at the time, there was agreement that Slovakia belongs in the EU. He also notes, "I want to thank our ex-Prime Minister, Mikuláš Dzurinda, for his classic Slovak politics, because at present, it cannot be said that such classic politics exist anymore." (YouTube, 2024 2024, 3:02).

Fico frequently references historical dates in his discourse, and in this instance, he refers to the period when Slovakia was at a crossroads about joining the EU. He brings up this era to remind people that, at the time, he and other politicians unanimously agreed that EU membership was beneficial for Slovakia, appealing particularly to those who remember that period. Additionally, he expresses gratitude toward a former prime minister—whom he had previously criticized for implementing neoliberal reforms—using this acknowledgment as a populist strategy to evoke nostalgia among older voters and reinforce his image as Slovakia's protector. Ironically, Fico himself has often contributed to societal divisions through his polarizing rhetoric, which has caused ruptures among citizens with his offensive politics.

He continues with the statement, "I cannot fully agree that Slovakia's entry into the EU was some sort of return of Slovakia to Europe; after all, we were already in Europe." (YouTube, 2024 2024, 3:49). He asserts that there is a clear consensus regarding Slovakia's EU membership when it comes to continuing this membership, but that consensus ends there, as Fico holds a different view on the quality of future membership in this institution.

With his statement, Fico redefines membership in the EU as an economic and political relationship rather than a geographical and cultural fact, creating the idea that being part of the EU is a choice rather than a necessity. Fico presents Slovakia as an inherent part of the EU, independent of institutional membership. With this, Fico contests the old discourse and constructs a new one. As Fairclough argues, discourse is both constitutive and contested, and Fico's approach aligns with this theory.

Moreover, Fico's discourse reflects his broader shift toward Euroscepticism. Through this reframing, he subtly constructs the EU as a potential threat to Slovakia's sovereignty rather than a natural and beneficial alliance. He creates a discursive space where skepticism toward EU policies can be justified. Therefore, his statement is not just a revision of history but a strategic move to redefine Slovakia's role in Europe, reinforcing a nationalist and sovereignty-focused discourse that distances itself from unquestioned support for EU integration.

He returns to his earlier remark that Slovakia was already in Europe and emphasizes that Slovaks should take greater pride in themselves. He recalls King Svatopluk, a significant and respected figure in the European context. "If I say that we have been in Europe, please, let's be a little prouder of ourselves. Let's remember King Svatopluk, and I'm sorry that we didn't build his statue three times bigger." (YouTube, 2024 2024, 4:14) He also highlights important historical documents, such as the Zobor charters from 1111 and 1113, which confirmed the quality of life in the territory at that time. Furthermore, he mentions other notable figures but underscores the most important and significant individual, Alexander Dubček. (YouTube, 2024, 5:18)

Fico further reinforces his discourse strategy centered on national pride by emphasizing Slovakia's historical connection to Europe. With enthusiastic tone, he underscores Slovak national pride and references historical figures to strengthen his rhetorical appeal. His statement, "Let's be a little prouder of ourselves," serves as an appeal to nationalist sentiments in Slovakia, positioning his political stance as one of unwavering commitment to the nation. Through intertextual references, Fico invokes historical events and figures to legitimize his expressions of national pride and justify his political decisions. He emphasizes king Svatopluk, which he often mentions even in his other discourses and media appearances. Again, populistically mention his regretting comment about the statue of Svatopluk, which is displayed in the middle of Bratislava Castle, an important historical building and museum in the capitol of Slovakia. His final reference to Alexander Dubček adds another layer of political dimension to his discourse. Dubček is a pivotal figure in Slovak political history who played an important role in the Prague Spring, a period during which Czechoslovakia gradually moved toward a more liberalized socialist system. His advocacy for "socialism with a human face" became emblematic of reformist leadership and national dignity, further reinforcing Fico's ideological positioning.

"It wasn't just us who believed that integration into the EU was a completely natural step, given our presence in Europe. Let us recall the statement made by a German politician: 'Let us also look to the East. If we want Europe to be strong, let us look to the East and their rich historical traditions. We don't have to fear that they are culturally different or distinct from the West, they will not harm us.'" (YouTube, 2024, 5:57)

As outlined in our methodology, CDA emphasizes the role of language in shaping and reflecting social realities. In this statement, Robert Fico presents EU integration as a "completely natural step," employing a presupposition that membership in the EU was inevitable. Intertextually, he reinforces his previous assertion that Slovakia has historically and geographically been an integral part of Europe by referencing the words of a founding statesman of the European Union. By doing so, he constructs a position for himself that allows him to critique EU policies more freely, positioning Slovakia's membership as an inherent and unquestionable reality.

This discourse enables him to dissociate his criticisms from potential implications for Slovakia's standing within the EU, as he presents its membership as a natural and historically justified affiliation. Moreover, his statement "let us look to the East" may signal a broader geopolitical strategy, suggesting an intention to pursue a more diversified foreign policy. Following his most recent inauguration as Prime Minister, he has frequently emphasized that his administration will communicate with global actors beyond the European Union. He repeatedly asserts that Russia, China, and other international players should not be disregarded, advocating for a more inclusive approach to foreign relations, in which the EU itself should consider strengthening cooperation with these actors.

He once again returns to the point he made earlier, emphasizing that in Slovakia, there is consensus only on the question of EU membership, but it fades in other areas. "I see three areas where we should strive for consensus: the first is the return to Slovakia's prosperity, the second is respecting the traditions and roots upon which Slovakia stands, and the third is certainly the question of peace." (YouTube, 2024, 6:38).

He elaborates on the mentioned areas, explaining that by prosperity, he means coming together, regardless of whether we are left-wing or right-wing, opposition or government, and collectively agreeing on goals that extend beyond a single term in office and have lasting effects. He reminds

the audience that in many indicators, Slovakia is falling behind, even though it once held a better position than others.

"This is the greatest challenge for Slovakia: to mobilize all resources and prepare measures that will allow our country to make a comeback." (YouTube, 2024, 7:33).

Fico reiterates the lack of national consensus in Slovakia, identifying three key areas in which greater unity is needed. He elaborates on the economic dimension, constructing a vision of national cohesion that transcends political differences in pursuit of economic growth. Through this narrative, he positions himself as an inclusive leader committed to bridging political divides for the collective benefit of all citizens. Furthermore, he employs comparative analysis with other countries to emphasize Slovakia's relative decline, evoking a sense of nostalgia for a past era when Slovakia outperformed others. This rhetorical strategy reinforces the notion that the country has lost its former status, implicitly suggesting the need for corrective action.

Moving to other areas, he comments: "I cannot blame anyone for having different opinions on traditions and roots, nor can I blame anyone for having a different view on peace or war. Yes, there are quite diverse opinions on these matters here in Slovakia. I just want to pledge that we will respect what the Constitution says... and the Constitution states that Slovakia is a peaceful country." (YouTube, 2024, 8:18).

As previously noted, Fico has frequently employed a discourse that polarizes Slovak society, delineating citizens into two opposing groups: nationalists and liberals. Within this framework, liberals have often been portrayed as a threat to Slovak traditions. He has often adopted an aggressive rhetorical stance, particularly against minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, while also critiquing the European Union's support for what he labels as "liberal ideology," framing it as a danger to Slovak cultural values.

However, in a strategic shift, he now acknowledges Slovakia's ideological diversity. A particularly significant aspect of his discourse is his stance on peace, which directly relates to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and its perception within Slovakia. Unlike the dominant EU narrative, which largely identifies Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim, Fico approaches the issue with notable caution. He frequently characterizes the war as a broader geopolitical struggle between the United States and Russia, positioning Ukraine as a subordinate



actor under U.S. influence. This perspective resonates strongly with more traditionally and conservatively inclined segments of Slovak society.

His rhetorical strategy is subtly embedded in statements such as “Yes, there are quite diverse opinions on these matters here in Slovakia,” which serve to normalize ideological divergence on this issue. In an effort to depoliticize the topic, he refers to the Slovak Constitution as an authoritative reference, framing his position as an institutionally grounded reality rather than a politically motivated viewpoint.

He asks how future reforms within EU, how economic policy will develop, and what steps will be taken. He emphasizes that Slovakia, in his view, should actively engage, particularly in foreign policy. He highlights that the EU as a whole struggles to assert a unified and sovereign direction in its foreign policy, especially toward its ally, the United States. He points out that Slovakia and his generation of politicians have often expressed differing views, such as condemning the bombing of Yugoslavia or withdrawing troops from Iraq. He asserts that the EU should also aim to be more sovereign and independent in achieving its foreign policy objectives. “For now, we are merely watching helplessly at our close partner across the Atlantic, but we are unable to provide them with a sovereign and unified European foreign policy.” (YouTube, 2024, 9:34)

In this section, Fico positions Slovakia as an assertive and sovereign actor by highlighting instances where the country diverged from U.S. foreign policy directives. He references the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, which was framed in Western discourse as a humanitarian intervention but was perceived by many Slovak politicians, including Fico, as an act of Western aggression. Similarly, he underscores Slovakia’s decision to withdraw its troops from Iraq, thereby rejecting U.S. military intervention. Through these examples, Fico implicitly advocates for greater European strategic autonomy, suggesting that the European Union should pursue independent foreign policy decisions rather than uncritically aligning with U.S. interests. From the CDA perspective, Fico is constructing Slovakian political identity, in which the country is more than a passive actor. Furthermore, he extends this argument to Slovakia’s position within the EU, emphasizing the importance of critical engagement with EU policies rather than unquestioned compliance. This perspective is particularly evident in his stance on the Ukraine conflict, where he has openly criticized the EU’s approach, including the sanctions on Russia. From a security perspective, Fico frames the absence of a unified and sovereign EU foreign

policy as a geopolitical vulnerability, warning that failure to assert independence could diminish the EU's global influence. Thus, he presents European sovereignty not only as a necessity but as a crucial factor in maintaining the EU's position within the international power structure.

Another topic he addresses is the ambitious plans of the European Union and what needs to be done with them. He mentions the advantages that the EU brings but expresses concern "Many people are afraid that EU might turn into a skanzem for tourists, losing its industrial advantages and competitiveness." (YouTube, 2024, 9:47). He notes that many regions are advancing, and Slovakia wants to be part of the discussions on whether it is even possible to implement the plans that the EU has presented. (YouTube, 2024, 10:17)

This statement reflects a skeptical perspective on the European Union's economic future. Fico employs the term skanzem, a Slovak word referring to a folk museum that preserves historical buildings, traditions, and art. By using this metaphor, he implies that the EU risks becoming an outdated relic rather than a dynamic global economic power. He positions himself against allowing Slovakia to be pulled into what he perceives as the EU's economic stagnation. Once again, he underscores the necessity of global cooperation, advocating for stronger engagement with international partners beyond the EU.

The final area is the right of veto. Fico claims he was surprised by the parliament's vote on this topic, which approved the introduction of qualified majority voting on essential matters. "If I am mistaken, please correct me, but as far as I know, there are still three areas where we vote unanimously: security, the budget, and foreign policy... ... imagine if the right of veto were abolished, and on essential issues, decisions would be made by a majority of countries at the expense of the smaller ones." (YouTube, 2024, 11:21)

Fico's emphasis on security, the budget, and foreign policy is significant, as these domains are among the most sensitive to national sovereignty. By highlighting these areas, he implicitly argues that transitioning to qualified majority voting in such matters would undermine Slovakia's ability to independently shape its policies. Moreover, his assertion that this shift would occur "at the expense of the smaller ones" suggests that the veto mechanism serves as a safeguard against power imbalances between larger and smaller states. In this framing, the loss of the veto is

presented as a direct threat to the autonomy of smaller nations, while granting disproportionate influence on more powerful member states. This discourse creates an atmosphere of fear, reinforcing the narrative that Brussels dictates in Slovakia, thereby limiting national agency. Such discourse tactics are often used by Fico, strategically employed to resonate with his Euroskeptic voter base by portraying EU decision-making as an encroachment on national sovereignty.

In conclusion, we arrive at the most fundamental issue, the question of peace. Fico states that Slovakia is a peace-loving country, and that the EU was established with the same purpose, as a peace project. "With all due respect, if we look at the project today, the EU is far from being a peace project." (YouTube, 2024, 12:18)

Fico openly questions the core principles on which the European Union was founded, expressing strong scepticism about its ability to uphold peace. Once again, he references the conflict in Ukraine, criticizing the EU's political approach to the war. He frames Slovakia in a positive light as a "peaceful country" while subtly suggesting that the EU, rather than fostering stability, is exacerbating the conflict and contributing to further destruction. Through this rhetoric, he portrays the EU as a threat to peace and indirectly implies that Slovakia would be better off distancing itself from its current trajectory. Fico concludes his speech with the words: "Long live Slovakia, long live the EU, may we prosper together." (YouTube, 2024, 14:13)

## **The shift in the discourse**

In this section we will focus on the changes of Robert Fico's discourse on the European Union, comparing his 2014 interview with his 2024 speech. Fico's 2014 discourse was characterized by strong pro-European rhetoric, emphasizing Slovakia's deep integration into the EU, however his 2024 speech marks a significant departure, inclining toward Euroscepticism, nationalist undertones and an emphasis on sovereignty.

In the 2014, Fico's discourse is marked by a strong pro-European politician where he named Slovakia's EU membership as an extraordinary success story. He presented Slovakia's participation in the Union as the only viable path, stating that deeper EU integration was in the country's vital interest. At the same time, Fico actively countered skepticism toward EU policies, arguing that Slovakia had benefited the most among the countries that joined in the 2004 enlargement. By 2024, however, this advocacy of the EU had shifted into a more cautious, two-

sided framing. On one hand, Fico confirmed that EU membership had brought Slovakia advantages, on the other hand he also emphasized Slovakia's role as a contributor rather than a mere beneficiary. shift distances Slovakia from being framed as dependent on EU support and instead portrays the country as an equal partner in a transactional relationship. What is more, he implicitly mentioned that there are several topics, in which Slovakia does not follow EU current trajectory.

This brings another major change in Fico's discourse. In 2014, he strongly supported European integration, acknowledging that Slovakia had sacrificed some sovereignty in areas like monetary policy and border control. He even argued that these trade-offs were necessary and beneficial, framing them as strategic decisions that enhanced Slovakia's economic stability and geopolitical security. By 2024, he had changed this stance, and he portrays EU membership as a potential threat to national sovereignty. He stated that Slovakia's presence in Europe should not be defined by institutional membership, but rather by its historical and cultural belonging to the continent.

Economic discourse in Fico's speeches also underwent a notable transformation. In 2014, he strongly defended Slovakia's economic progress within the EU, countering public skepticism by emphasizing statistical improvements, such as a 70% increase in wages since accession. He dismissed negative media portrayals and misinformation about EU economic policies, asserting that Slovakia's economic success was largely due to EU integration. In 2024, he cast doubt on the EU's economic future, warning that Europe might turn into a "skanzem" losing its industrial competitiveness. He expressed concerns that EU economic policies were unrealistic, and that Slovakia should be cautious about fully aligning with them.

While in 2014, Fico respected the regional alliances, mainly the Visegrad Four, within the broader European framework, his 2024 discourse signals a broader geopolitical realignment. He now advocates for stronger engagement with non-EU actors, emphasizing that Slovakia should not be exclusively tied to Western alliances but should focus on all directions.

Another major shift is Fico's use of historical and cultural references. In 2014, he did not significantly invoke nationalist rhetoric, instead he focused on economic and political achievements within the EU framework. Although, at that period of time Fico often used historical references in many of his texts, strategically he did not use one when talking about EU to promote his Eurocentric visions. However, by 2024, he reframes Slovakia's European identity,

arguing that Slovakia has always been an integral part of Europe regardless of institutional membership. He reminds historical figures such as King Svatopluk and Alexander Dubček, reinforcing a nationalist narrative that portrays Slovakia as historically sovereign and independent from external control.

## **Discussion**

Our findings reveal a significant shift in Robert Fico's political discourse over the course of a decade. By situating these changes within their broader political and socio-economic context, we can better understand the evolution of his rhetoric.

When Fico first became Prime Minister, Slovakia had already joined the EU and was preparing to adopt the euro. This period of economic growth and public satisfaction reinforced his pro-European stance. Aligning with national sentiment, he positioned himself as a pro-EU politician advocating for integration. His 2014 discourse reflected this, portraying Slovakia as an active participant in shaping European institutions.

Until 2015, Fico maintained his pro-European image, supporting EU reforms and regional alliances. However, during the 2015 refugee crisis, his stance shifted. Public resistance to migration and rising fears over terrorism fueled a nationalist turn in his rhetoric. He began criticizing EU policies, particularly migrant quotas, framing them as threats to Slovakia's sovereignty and cultural identity. This marked the beginning of his Euroskeptical narrative.

Following his 2018 resignation, Fico intensified his anti-EU rhetoric, attributing political influence in Slovakia to external actors like George Soros. As the Ukrainian conflict escalated, his discourse became more pro-Russian, portraying EU alignment as harmful to national interests. Our analysis of the speech reflects this shift, emphasizing nationalist values and distancing Slovakia from EU policies.

His shift in discourse has not only deepened polarization within Slovak society splitting it between pro-European and pro-Russian camps, but also secured his standing among pro-Russian supporters. He strengthened their loyalty as voters, presenting himself as a defender of Slovak values. Furthermore, his escalating criticism of the EU carries significant consequences for Slovakia's role within the union and could potentially jeopardize its membership. In sum, Fico's

changing discourse is not just a reflection of shifting political beliefs but a calculated response to domestic and international developments. His rhetoric has far-reaching consequences, influencing Slovakia's political landscape, its relationship with the EU, and the country's geopolitical positioning in an increasingly polarized Europe.

What makes Fico's political transformation significant? His ability to recalibrate his discourse is crucial because it reflects the evolving attitudes within Slovakia, both as a nation and as a member of the EU. Fico has always demonstrated a keen awareness of public sentiment, strategically adjusting his rhetoric to align with shifting societal and geopolitical dynamics. His shifting stance not only mirrors changing political realities but also serves as a strategic effort to both influence and align with the concerns of the Slovak electorate, securing his ongoing political relevance.

His changes are important because of the evolving context of Slovakia as a nation and as part of the EU alliance. Fico's political leadership in 2024 has taken a dramatic turn toward consolidating power for himself. Shortly after his appointment as Prime Minister in 2023, Fico made changes within law enforcement and amended criminal law. He also dissolved the Special Prosecutor's Office, an institution that investigated major corruption cases, and reduced sentences for corruption (Krempaská, 2024). What is more, Fico, as only the third Western representative of the EU, visited Vladimir Putin in Moscow in December 2024 to discuss gas prices (Bandouil, 2024).

These developments raise concerns about Slovakia's political trajectory under Fico's leadership. His positioning remains paradoxical, as Slovakia remains tied to EU structures, which advocate for unity against Russian influence. This raises the question of whether Fico's approach represents a genuine strategic realignment or a performative stance aimed at appealing to specific domestic audiences. Ultimately, his discourse balances between resisting EU pressures and maintaining Slovakia's geopolitical and economic interests, reinforcing the tension between national sovereignty and European integration in his political narrative.

## **Conclusion**

Our thesis aimed to answer the research question: How has Robert Fico's discourse about the European Union shifted between 2014 and 2024?

To properly respond to the question, in our thesis we analyzed two key texts, Robert Fico's 2014 interview and his 2024 speech. The 2014 interview was selected to represent Fico's discourse at a time when he strongly advocated for Slovakia's European integration. In contrast, after a decade of political and geopolitical transformations, the 2024 speech reflects a more Eurosceptic and sovereignty-focused narrative.

Correspondingly, to contextualize the speeches and how they were influenced, we established historical and political events in two chapters. These chapters provided us with an overview of Slovakia's relationship with the European Union and the political actions of Robert Fico, beginning with accession in 2004, the economic transition and Euro adoption and the shifting of the political landscape under Fico's leadership. Key events such as the 2015 refugee crisis, the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018, and Fico's political comeback in 2023 were examined as well.

Through Critical Discourse Analysis and Securitization theory, we identified several key shifts in Fico's rhetoric. CDA allowed for a textual and contextual examination of Fico's speeches in 2014 and 2024, highlighting how his language, argumentation, and framing of key issues evolved over time while Securitization Theory examined how his discourse shaped and reinforced the perception of security threats.

After delving into these two critical speeches, we can conclude his political views have shifted. In 2014, he framed Slovakia's membership in the EU as an extraordinary success, emphasizing the economic benefits, stability, and strategic necessity of deeper integration. As exemplified by his strong statement about the European Union being the only viable path for Slovakia's future development. He also openly dismissed any concerns about sovereignty losses and securitized non-membership as a risk to economic and political stability. In other terms, his discourse at this stage aligned with pro-European narratives, portraying Slovakia as a committed and reliable EU member. By contrast, in 2024, Fico's discourse had transformed significantly. While he acknowledged that Slovakia had gained from EU membership, he distanced himself from unconditional support for European integration. It can be seen his speech was marked by nationalist undertones, historical references, and an emphasis on sovereignty, positioning

Slovakia as an independent actor rather than a dependent beneficiary of EU policies. His discourse further securitized EU influence, portraying Brussels as a potential threat to national sovereignty, peace, economic autonomy, and political decision-making.. In 2014, he strongly advocated for deeper EU integration and cooperation among the Visegrad Four group, whereas in 2024, his agenda was marked by political tensions for collaboration with "all sides of the world," not exclusively with EU and western powers, evidently inclining towards pro-Russian rhetoric.

In conclusion, this thesis has demonstrated that political discourse is highly dynamic, evolving in response to shifting geopolitical, political, and economic conditions. Fico's rhetorical transformation between 2014 and 2024 reflects not only Slovakia's changing relationship with the European Union but also broader shifts in regional political narratives. His discourse demonstrates how political leaders strategically alter their messaging to maintain relevance and legitimacy in fluctuating political landscapes. Fico has repositioned Slovakia within an increasingly polarized global order by securitizing EU influence and placing great importance on sovereignty. This study underscored the role of discourse as an active force in shaping national and international policy orientations. Future research could further investigate how such rhetorical shifts translate into concrete policy changes, what other influences these transformations aside from national securitization, and whether similar patterns emerge among other political actors in Slovakia and the broader Visegrad region.



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