

Where have the Hungarian minority parties gone? Ethnicization and limited minority mobilization in the 2023 parliamentary election in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT This article examines why Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia failed to gain parliament seats in the 2023 election despite their formal unification. Using municipal-level data from 16 districts in southern Slovakia, we analyze spatial patterns of support for the main ethnic Hungarian party, Szövetség-Aliancia, and the factors associated with its vote. The results show that Szövetség-Aliancia's electoral support remains overwhelmingly ethnicized, with a strong and uniform effect of ethnic cleavage. However, the analysis also reveals considerable internal heterogeneity in mobilization within the minority. Voter turnout was systematically lower in ethnically heterogeneous municipalities, indicating uneven electoral mobilization and widespread abstention among the minority electorate. The findings show that although ethnic voting persists, limited mobilization, rather than interparty competition suggested by the nested competition and ethnic outbidding models, has become the key constraint on minority political representation.

KEY WORDS electoral mobilization – ethnic parties – ethnicization – Hungarian minority in Slovakia – nested competition – Szövetség-Aliancia

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1. Introduction

Political parties representing the Hungarian minority in Slovakia played an important role in key political moments of the country. They participated in several government coalitions, helped push through fundamental political reforms, and contributed to Slovakia's democratization. For instance, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK-MKP; Strana maďarskej koalície - Magyar Koalíció Pártja) was involved in removing autocratic Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar from power in 1998 and participated in Slovakia's accession to NATO and the EU six years later. Most-Híd, a party that aimed to *bridge*¹ Hungarian and Slovak communities in Slovakia, built its parliamentary successes on coexistence rhetoric and accentuated the pro-EU policy. Nevertheless, despite such political integration at the central level, these parties were unable to fully overcome their ethnic-regional character and remained dependent on electoral mobilization and support mostly from the Hungarian national minority in southern Slovakia (Plešivčák 2011).

The 2020 parliamentary election represented a major turning point; it was the first election in the modern history of Slovakia in which the Hungarian minority parties failed to enter the parliament. Consequently, the minority party structure underwent a reorganization, with SMK-MKP and Most-Híd negotiating a cooperation and unification so that the failure would not be repeated. It resulted in the creation of a new Hungarian minority party - The Hungarian Alliance (Szövetség-Alliancia, Magyar Szövetség - Maďarská Aliancia). The 2023 parliamentary election was thus marked by reflection on whether these efforts had been successful. The pre-election campaign was characterised by concerns and pessimistic expectations (Gál 2023; Belej Majerčínová 2023a), which materialized when the Hungarian minority parties were again unsuccessful in entering the parliament (Harrach 2024). Given the potential constituency of almost 8.5% of the minority electorate in the case of voting according to both self-declared nationality and mother tongue (Štatistický úrad 2021), the combined result of 4.5% for all Hungarian minority parties raises the question of what the limits are of the ethnic Hungarian electoral mobilization in Slovakia. This question is, in its general sense, relevant also beyond the case of the Hungarian national minority parties in Slovakia, as limited mobilization behind some regional parties in the last two decades constrained their long-term aims (e.g. Lepič 2017, Agnew 2018) and the ability to represent the minority community (e.g. Kiss, Székely 2016; Fittante, Himmelroos 2025b).

¹ Most-Híd literally means bridge in Slovak and Hungarian languages, respectively.

2. Research gap and objectives

Since the beginning of Slovakia's democratization in 1989, research in electoral geography has been the subject of several studies. Most authors have focused on the political regionalization of Slovakia based on election results and explanation of their spatial patterns (e.g. Krivý, Feglová, Balko 1996; Plešivčák 2011, 2014). In this respect, Madleňák (2012) emphasized the ongoing importance of the ethno-national cleavage in Slovakia's politics (see also Kostelecký 2001), partially reinforced by the left-right political oppositions. He also contextualized this opposition within the broader range of cleavage effects, including attitudinal, that are capable of cross-cutting the ascriptively delimited societal categories (see also Lijphart 1984, Inglehart 2008). Among the recent studies, Kevický and Daněk (2020) and Kevický and Suchánek (2023) have addressed the role of voter turnout, its spatial dimension at the district level, and the effect of ethnicity on turnout differences in the parliamentary elections between 1996–2016 and in 2020, respectively. Finally, Gyárfášová (2018), Gyárfášová and Hlatky (2023), and Ondruška (2022) examined the recent rise of populist and anti-establishment parties, the importance of leaders for the party choice among voters, and the consequences for (in)stability of the party system in Slovakia.

In this article, we build upon the findings of this literature, but, at the same time, emphasize that there are still gaps in research, particularly when it comes to the geographically nested (see Harbers, Ingram 2017) and detailed analysis of the Hungarian minority's electoral preferences and behaviour. The historically strong support for Hungarian minority parties in southern Slovakia, especially in municipalities with a high proportion of ethnic Hungarians, has indeed been confirmed by several studies (see Plešivčák 2011, Madleňák 2012). We argue, however, that the patterns of electoral support for Hungarian minority parties, and the reasons behind such voting, must be examined not only in the "groupist" terms (see Brubaker 2002) of the ethno-national cleavage but also with regard to the differences in electoral mobilization and voting behaviour within the minority, with the underlying aim to overcome the constraints of methodological nationalism.

Plešivčák (2011) expressed conviction that we can expect the continued dominance of the Hungarian ethnic parties in regions predominantly inhabited by the Hungarian national minority. This ethno-national differentiation of voting enabled by the politicization of national identity corresponds to the premise that ethnicity is one of the fundamental drivers behind political mobilization of the electorate (e.g. Rokkan, Urwin 1983; Horowitz 1985). However, it is clear from the results of the last two parliamentary elections that the Hungarian national minority in Slovakia either voted also for the non-minority parties or did not vote at all (Gyurovszky 2025, Harrach 2024). It demonstrates the internal heterogeneity of

the Hungarian minority community and raises questions about the factors that direct such a cross-cutting.

This article therefore aims to analyse the voting behaviour of the Hungarian minority in the 2023 parliamentary election in southern Slovakia, measured at the level of municipalities ($N = 1,012$), and contribute to understanding the failure of the Hungarian minority parties, in particular Szövetség-Aliancia. The main objectives are to (1) map the spatial patterns of electoral support for Szövetség-Aliancia, (2) identify the factors that influenced the election results of this party, in particular the strength of ethnic voting, and (3) examine the (un)evenness of minority electoral mobilization in the party's favour.

3. Ethnic parties, cleavages, and (in)equalities in electoral mobilization

The presence of ethnic minority parties within the political spectrum of a country is widely considered to contribute to the stability of democratic systems and, at the same time, to the reduction of political conflict in (not only) post-communist Europe (e.g. Fittante, Himmelroos 2025a; Flesken 2018; Koev 2019; Rovny 2023; Spirova 2012; Svraka 2025). This is because these parties often present a moderate voice in the political arena and enable political incorporation of otherwise neglected minorities. Gradual demise of the Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia therefore instigates not only the questions of stability but also that of (dis)integration: To what extent are the Hungarian minority voters segmented in ethnic voting for “their” parties compared to other state-wide parties, and how (un)equal is minority electoral mobilization in support for these parties? To provide the background for our analysis, in this section, we conceptualize ethnic parties and discuss theoretical assumptions concerning the ethnic segmentation of their voting base vis-a-vis other factors, and the minority's cohesion (or lack thereof) in their electoral behaviour.

The classic definition of ethnic party, developed by Chandra (2004, 2011) and replicated in other accounts (e.g. Strijbis, Kotnarowski 2015; Steward 2019; Svraka 2025), is that ethnic party appeals to voters as the champion of interests of a particular ethnic category (or set of categories) while excluding others, and makes such appeal central to its mobilizing strategy. This definition requires that for political parties to be considered ethnic, their programme, manifestos, appeals, demands, and political goals must be of ethno-cultural nature; their organization, leadership, and membership is from a particular ethnic group, and party constituency is predominantly composed of individuals belonging to particular ethnic category (Ishiyama, Breuning 2011; Higashijima, Nakai 2016). Apparently, not only minority parties but also those aiming to represent the state majority may be classified as ethnic if they have corresponding characteristics (Tarkhani 2024). In

this regard, the definition of ethnic group which the ethnic party aims to represent is made ascriptively in the party's rhetoric, building on the premises of a given nationalism. This normative categorization is frequently at odds with the actual ethnic identification of individuals, and for this reason we consider the target electorate to be a possibly heterogeneous ethnic category, not necessarily a group in an identarian and behavioural sense.

In any case, the definition indicates that not only the party organization and appeals but also its support base is of an importance for party classification as ethnic. Horowitz (1985) even claims that ethnic party must have an ethnic support base, even though this is only one of the ethnic party attributes. We understand this relationship as an interaction: Ethnic party attempts to represent the assumed interests of an ethnic category considered to be a group, and if it is successful, this group mobilizes in the party's favour. In this circumstance, the ethnic party support develops along the ethnic cleavage, meaning that the party gains votes predominantly from a particular ethnic category (Zuber 2013; see also Tanaka 2025). From the perspective of voters, in this scenario they prioritize ethnicity in their decision-making and electoral behaviour. Such ethnic voting externally distinguishes ethnic group's preferences from other ethnic categories in the electoral system. But the thesis of ethnic voting builds on an improbable assumption of homogeneity within the ethnic category and implicates groupism.

Given the frequent occurrence of intra-ethnic heterogeneity, the phenomenon of ethnic voting must be distinguished from electoral mobilization (see Strijbis, Kotnarowski 2015). According to these authors, electoral mobilization can be understood as "the degree to which ethnic parties are able to mobilize their targeted ethnic group" so that the individuals belonging to this category vote for "their" ethnic party. In contrast to the indicator of ethnic voting, measuring electoral mobilization allows us to examine the internal cohesion (or lack thereof) of the ethnic category in electoral support for a party. Importantly, if electoral mobilization in favour of an ethnic party is unequal within the ethnic category in question, we have to consider an alternative scenario for a non-mobilized segment of the minority – support for other than ethnic parties, voter abstentions, or both.

The occurrence of distinct preferences within the ethnic category, which then manifest in different voting behaviours, is similar to the concept of nested competition (Zuber 2012). It delineates a situation in which one ethnic party shifts its appeals in an integrative and cross-ethnic direction when its ethnic competitor manifests growing radicalization. As such, the model of nested competition challenges the premises of ethnic outbidding model (e.g. Zuber, Szöcsik 2015). Nevertheless, given that parties do not build their appeals in a vacuum but always in interaction with the electorate, we posit that the range of party and voter behaviours is wider than both models suggest and, moreover, may vary across time and space. While one fraction within the ethnic category remains solid in

its support for a radicalizing ethnic party, other segments may shift between supporting inclusive majority parties and de-aligning from the electoral system if the inclusive minority parties are not available or not trusted. Even the reasoning behind de-aligning may be driven by different motivations – from general disillusion and feelings that parties do not represent one’s interests, through focus on the integration at the local level, to ethno-national kin-state affiliations and election boycott (Waterbury 2020). Our approach therefore contributes to the literature by partially challenging the premises of the nested competition and ethnic outbidding models (e.g. Zuber 2012, 2013; Tarkhani 2024; Stroschein 2011; Spáč, Zagraban 2025). Moreover, both the power-sharing consociational and the state-centralizing integration models may fail to succeed when ethnic categories are considered only in singular and immutable terms (Lijphart 1979; Dostál, Jelen 2015).

In the analysis that follows, we attempt to explain the gradual decline in the Hungarian minority party support in Slovakia using the aforementioned premises. After mapping the strongholds of Szövetség-Aliancia’s support in the 2023 parliamentary election, we analyse the extent to which its support in southern Slovakia is explained by the ethnic cleavage vis-a-vis the influence of other factors. Consequently, we investigate the extent to which the Hungarian minority in Slovakia was internally homogeneous in its preferences for this party. Given that other Hungarian minority parties are nowadays marginal, which disqualifies the potential explanatory power of the ethnic outbidding and the nested competition models, our main aim is to analyse (in)equality in the minority’s electoral mobilization in terms of electoral abstentions. Indeed, as argued by Steward (2019), ethnic parties may become marginalized at the central level not only by electoral rules, which frequently favour state-wide parties (such as the 5% threshold), but also by ineffective electoral mobilization within the category which the party aims to represent.

4. Political developments of the Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia after 1989

To understand the position in which the political parties aiming to represent the Hungarian minority in Slovakia – and mainly Szövetség-Aliancia – entered the 2023 parliamentary election, it is essential to introduce the buildout of the minority party structure. This development, in fact, (in)directly influences voter behaviour and its spatial differentiation, including electoral mobilization and thus participation. Since the early 1990s, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia has been represented by a plethora of parties and entities (see Fig. 1).

The evolution of the Hungarian minority’s political party structure can be divided into four phases. The first phase, from 1989 to 1998, was characterized by

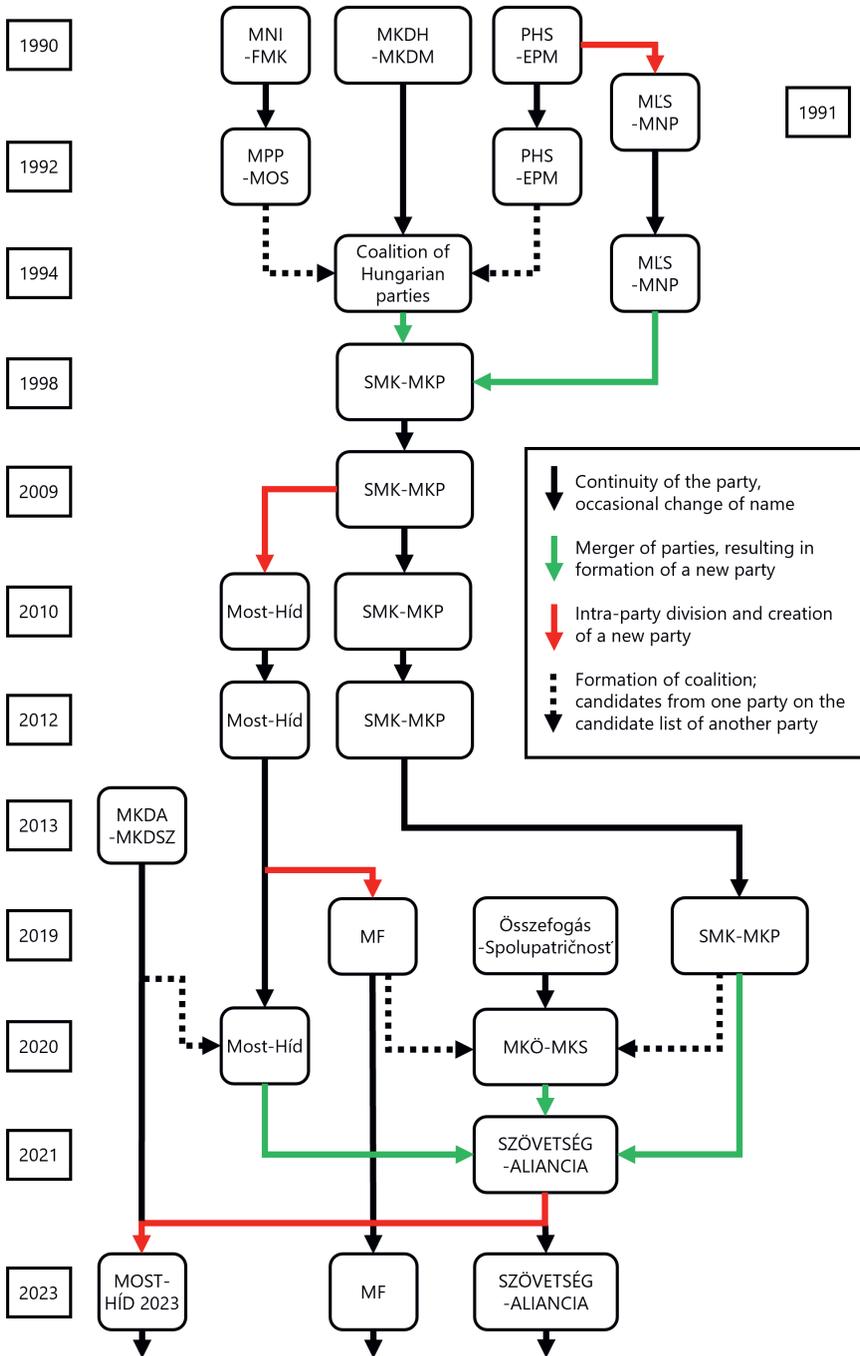


Fig. 1 – The development of political representation of Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The figure was adjusted and updated based on Everett a Redžič (2021).

several smaller ethnic Hungarian parties, some of which cooperated with each other and formed electoral coalitions. For most of the 1990s, Hungarian minority parties were in opposition to the government, with the only exceptions being the first government of Vladimír Mečiar (1990–1991) and subsequent government of Ján Čarnogurský (1991–1992).

The second phase began in 1998 with the merger of most Hungarian parties into the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK–MKP), mainly fuelled by their opposition to Mečiar’s nationalist policies. Although SMK–MKP overcame the initial fragmentation of Hungarian minority parties and became part of the government between 1998 and 2006, two factions gradually formed within it. The first faction consisted mainly of politicians from the officialdom, better integrated into the Slovak political and economic circles, while the second was more conservative, with better connections to Hungary as a kin-state (Székely 2014). The former was represented by party chairman Béla Bugár, while the latter by its honorary chairman Miklós Duray. Bugár was a charismatic leader who was often criticized within the SMK–MKP’s ranks for being more popular among ethnic Slovaks than Hungarians. Conversely, the more liberal faction criticized Duray’s hardline pro-Hungarian ethnic policies, as well as his close relationship with Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz (Kopeček 2007, Székely 2014). Growing polarization consequently led to the SMK–MKP’s split in 2009 and the formation of a new, liberal political party, Most-Híd.

This split marks the beginning of the third phase, characterized by rivalry between these two political parties. SMK–MKP took a much more radical, exclusivist stance and focused on the kin-state affiliations. In contrast, Most-Híd aimed for inclusion, cooperation across the ethnic divide, and mutual coexistence (Everett, Redžič 2021; Spáč, Zagraban 2025). Although SMK–MKP did not succeed in any further parliamentary elections, it still maintained a relatively strong position at the local and regional levels (Mesežnikov 2020). Most-Híd succeeded in the 2010 election, after which the party became incumbent in the Iveta Radičová’s centre-right government. The party also entered parliament following the 2012 and 2016 elections, both of which were won by Robert Fico and his party Smer – Sociálna Demokracia (Smer–SD; lit. Direction – Social Democracy). After the 2016 election Most-Híd signed a coalition agreement with Smer–SD, ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS; Slovenská národná strana), and conservative #SIEŤ (Mesežnikov 2020). This move angered not only a large part of its constituency, but also led to an inner split, when a former minister of agriculture Zsolt Simon left Most-Híd and later in 2019 founded his own party – Hungarian Forum (MF; Magyar Fórum – Maďarské fórum; Hospodárske noviny 2019). The resentment was further exacerbated after Most-Híd decided not to leave the coalition nor to support early election following the murders of journalist Ján Kuciak and his spouse Martina Kušnírová (Mesežnikov 2020). In response to the inability

of parties to agree on a joint candidate list before the 2020 parliamentary election, a new political movement, Togetherness (Összefogás-Spolupatričnosť) was formed, which eventually agreed with SMK-MKP and MF on a joint candidate list. This list was created by transforming Togetherness to Hungarian Community Togetherness (MKÖ-MKS; Magyar Közösségi Összefogás – Madarská komunitná spolupatričnosť; Pravda 2019). In the end, neither MKÖ-MKS nor Most-Híd were successful in their goal of entering the parliament in 2020.

The fourth phase began after the unsuccessful 2020 election bid, when the situation forced representatives of Togetherness, SMK-MKP and Most-Híd to negotiate. In March 2021, they announced a merger and an establishment of a new political party, Szövetség-Aliancia (Postoj 2021). Paradoxically, this merger made Szövetség-Aliancia the party with the largest membership base in Slovakia, with 14,217 declared members (SITA 2022). Despite efforts by the Hungarian parties to achieve unity by joining forces in Szövetség-Aliancia, another split soon occurred. Internal party conflict over the creation of a joint candidate list for the early parliamentary election in 2023 led to the departure of several members, particularly from the liberal platform Most-Híd. The splinter group subsequently founded Most-Híd 2023 and signed cooperation with Slovak party Modrí - ES, creating a Modrí, Most-Híd list (Belej Majerčínová 2023b). Szövetség-Aliancia dominated the election campaign in the Hungarian minority areas, and its vice-chairman György Gyimesi was the most prominent figure of the campaign on social media (Szicherle 2023). Gyimesi's posts focused primarily on criticizing liberal democracy, opposing arms deliveries to Ukraine, and blaming Brussels for its policies on immigration and sexual minorities. He used narratives similar to those of Hungary's ruling party Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán. Hungary as a claimed kin-state directly intervened in the campaign when, during the election week, the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, visited the border regions in southern Slovakia inhabited predominantly by the Hungarian minority and urged people to vote Szövetség-Aliancia (Szicherle 2023). Another main theme of the election campaign was the regional development of southern Slovakia, with most contributions on this topic being bilingual, attempting to target both ethnic Hungarian and Slovak voters living in these regions. After all, inter-ethnic cooperation at the local level has been noted in other studies (Spáč, Zagraban 2025). However, given the election results, neither the support of a kin-state partner nor the attempt to surpass the ethnic cleavage brought the party's success.

5. Data and methods

When selecting the study area, it was necessary to consider the spatial distribution of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. This ensured that the research primarily

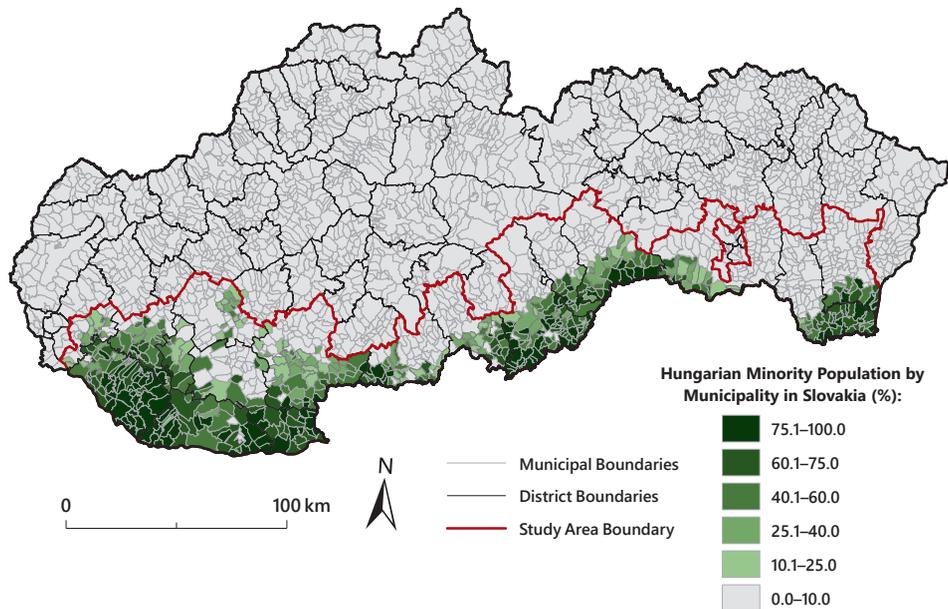


Fig. 2 – Delimitation of the study area and the share of the Hungarian minority population in Slovakia's municipalities. The source for all the base data used for maps is Geoportál (2024).

covered areas where the Hungarian national minority lives, while maintaining sufficient data variability for the analysis. In literature, 16 districts (*okresy*) located in southern Slovakia are most often used when studying the Hungarian minority (see Fig. 2). This is employed, for example, by the Forum Minority Research Institute, which conducts regular sociological surveys and opinion polls focused solely on the Hungarian minority. Mészárosová-Lampl (2019) and Székely (2014) refer to these districts as those with an ethnically mixed population. Several of these districts are identified in the research of Madleňák (2012) and Plešivčák (2011) as the core or periphery of electoral support for the Hungarian minority parties.

These districts are namely (west to east): Senec, Dunajská Streda, Galanta, Šaľa, Komárno, Nové Zámky, Nitra, Levice, Veľký Krtíš, Lučenec, Rimavská Sobota, Revúca, Rožňava, Košice-okolie, Trebišov, and Michalovce. The official administrative boundaries served for defining the extent of the study area. The decision to select entire districts and not merely the municipalities with a predominantly ethnic Hungarian population was based on the need to increase the variability of the sample under study, which allows to properly examine the effects of ethno-national cleavage on voting behaviour.

In order to achieve the most fine-grained data variability, municipalities were appointed as the level of analysis. The study area contains a total of

1,012 municipalities, representing more than one-third of all 2,891 municipalities in Slovakia. This selection includes virtually all municipalities with a significant proportion of the Hungarian national minority. Two general problems of any aggregate data analysis are associated with the definition of the scale level, namely the MAUP effect and the risk of ecological fallacy. A detailed scale level of municipalities is beneficial for minimizing the MAUP problem. The risk of ecological fallacy always persists in an aggregated data analysis. However, the risk of misinterpretation is reduced when explanation focuses on the analysed spatial units, not extrapolating to individuals' behaviour.

In the 2023 election, three political parties attempted to represent the Hungarian minority in Slovakia: Szövetség-Aliancia, Most-Híd 2023, and the MF. Szövetség-Aliancia received a total of 4.38% of the vote (see also Table 2). The other two Hungarian minority parties, which ran in coalitions with one or more other political entities, received less than 0.4% of the vote combined. Specifically, Most-Híd 2023, in coalition with Modrí – ES, received 0.26%, and MF, in coalition with several Slovak parties, received 0.11% (Štatistický úrad 2023). Due to the dominance of Szövetség-Aliancia among Hungarian minority parties and the fact that the two minor parties ran in coalitions with non-Hungarian parties in the election, we focus our analysis on Szövetség-Aliancia.

The main source of demographic and socioeconomic data was the 2021 Population and Housing Census. According to this census, as of January 1, 2021, there were 422,065 people of self-declared Hungarian nationality living in Slovakia, representing 7.75% of the total population. The 2021 census was, however, the first in Slovakia where residents could also declare a second nationality. An additional 34,089 residents declared Hungarian nationality as their second nationality. In total, 456,154 people declared Hungarian nationality as either their first or second nationality. This represents 8.37% of the population of Slovakia. Another important indicator of belonging to the Hungarian national minority is language. Hungarian was listed as the mother tongue by 462,175 people, representing 8.48% of the population of Slovakia (Štatistický úrad 2021).

Individual independent variables that entered the analysis were chosen based on the general conceptual premises of the cleavage theory (e.g. Lipset, Rokkan 1967; Kriesi 1998) and its modifications adapted to the specifics of Slovakia's society and politics (see Kostelecký 2001, Madleňák 2012). Apart from ethno-national cleavage, proxied by the indicator of self-declared Hungarian nationality, we examined the effects of ethno-religious cleavage (Calvinist faith), regional cleavage (distance from Bratislava), economic cleavage (university education, unemployment rate), and urban-rural cleavage (number of inhabitants). For each cleavage, we considered several proxies and eventually selected the aforementioned due to the fact that they represent the markers of the Hungarian minority and contributed to the explanatory power of the model. In addition, we included

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics of the analyzed variables

Variables	Variable dimension	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std. deviation
Electoral support of Szövetség-Aliancia	%	21.55	0.00	92.72	26.49
Hungarian nationality	%	29.63	0.00	95.24	32.86
Reformed Church	%	7.14	0.00	72.53	13.06
University education	%	10.51	0.00	33.98	5.69
Distance from Bratislava	km	192.78	11.47	379.44	110.04
Unemployment rate	%	6.81	0.51	31.12	4.78
Age 65+	%	16.46	2.95	34.78	4.35
Number of inhabitants	ln	6.53	2.64	11.28	1.07
Election turnout	%	62.16	27.74	91.89	10.98

one demographic (post-productive age) and one political (voter turnout) control variable. Descriptive statistics of all analyzed variables are shown in Table 1.

In order to examine the relationship between respective independent variables and voting support for Szövetség-Aliancia, a multiple linear regression using OLS was employed. Based on estimating the regression line by choosing the parameters that minimize the sum of squared residuals, this method implicitly assumes the same relationship between variables across all units of analysis. However, given both the incompact of shape of the area under study and the general tendencies of spatial analysis, a certain degree of non-stationarity should be anticipated (e.g. Lepič 2017). For this reason, we complemented the global statistical approach of the linear OLS regression by the local estimates of the coefficients using geographically weighted regression (GWR; Fotheringham, Brunson, Charlton 2002; Spurná 2008a). This allowed us to assess the degree to which the effects of respective cleavages are uniform (or locally varying) across the analysed area. Since GWR is a local method, therefore calculating parameter estimates for regression coefficients in each unit, we had to determine surrounding parameters for each local coefficient estimation. Adaptive core of bi-square kernel bandwidth was employed. One of the main interpretative advantages of combining OLS and GWR regressions is that both methods use standardized coefficients ranging within the interval $<-1; 1>$, where -1 equates to maximum negative while 1 to maximum positive association between variables. The total explanatory power and quality of the model is measured using the values of adjusted R-Square and AICc, respectively.

Spatial autocorrelation in the global form of Moran's I and its local equivalent LISA was employed in order to examine the degree and patterns of clustering in support for Szövetség-Aliancia, voter turnout, and the spatial association of residuals from the OLS regression model (Anselin 1995). Moran's I ranges within

the interval $\langle -1; 1 \rangle$, where -1 represents the maximum negative and 1 is the maximum positive spatial autocorrelation. Values close to 0 signify no spatial association. If the value is sufficiently distant from zero, spatial distribution of the phenomenon under study is not random (Spurná, 2008b).

The local indicators of spatial association (LISA) allow visualization of the spatial clustering of the examined variable, thus answering the question of where the low and high values of a phenomenon are clustered. To determine spatial proximity and ascribe units to clusters, a spatial weights matrix had to be established. We have chosen the threshold inverse distance of 10 km as a spatial weights matrix due to the fact that this specific matrix and distance were calculated by us as the most suitable for municipal structure of southern Slovakia.

6. Results

The 2023 parliamentary election in Slovakia was won by Smer-SD with 22.94% of the vote, followed by Progressive Slovakia (PS; Progresívne Slovensko) with 17.96% (see Table 2, which also displays the results of other parties). Voter turnout in the election was 68,51%. Although Szövetség-Aliancia surpassed the MKÖ-MKS's

Table 2 – Party results in the 2023 parliamentary election in Slovakia

Party	Votes	Votes (%)	Municipalities won	Municipalities won (%)	Mandates
SMER-SD	681,017	22.94	1,685	57.57	42
PS	533,136	17.96	180	6.15	32
HLAS-SD	436,415	14.70	280	9.57	27
OĽANO A PRIATELIA, KÚ a ZA ĽUDÍ	264,137	8.89	197	6.73	16
KDH	202,515	6.82	177	6.05	12
SaS	187,645	6.32	2	0.07	11
SNS	166,995	5.62	9	0.31	10
REPUBLIKA	141,099	4.75	5	0.17	0
SZÖVETSÉG – ALIANCIA	130,183	4.38	386	13.19	0
Demokrati	87,006	2.93	0	0.00	0
SME RODINA	65,673	2.21	4	0.14	0
ĽSNS	25,003	0.84	1	0.03	0
KSS	9,867	0.33	0	0.00	0
Piráti	9,358	0.31	0	0.00	0
Modrí, Most-Híd	7,935	0.26	0	0.00	0
MF, ODS, ZR, RK, DS	3,468	0.11	1	0.03	0

election result from 2020, it likewise failed to pass the 5% threshold for entering the parliament. The party received a total of 130,183 votes, which equates to 4.38% of all valid votes cast. Paradoxically, in purely spatial terms, Szövetség-Alliancia was the second most successful party after Smer-SD in the number of municipalities won (386 municipalities, 13.19% of the total; see Table 2 and Figure 3).

6.1. Spatial patterns of electoral support for Szövetség-Alliancia

Looking at the results of the 2023 election specifically in southern Slovakia (Fig. 3), a clear weakening of the relative support for all Slovak majority parties can be seen compared to the country's average. Although Smer-SD was also the strongest party in the study area, the second came Szövetség-Alliancia, which won 16.97% of the vote here, a significant increase compared to its country-wide result (Štatistický úrad 2023). The geographical core of Szövetség-Alliancia's support was concentrated in municipalities along the border with Hungary, and specifically in three main clusters (Fig. 3)².

The biggest cluster of Szövetség-Alliancia's support is located in the southern part of western Slovakia, in the Little Danubian Lowland, and specifically on the Žitný ostrov (Csallóköz). It stretches alongside the border with Hungary from suburban municipalities around Bratislava in the west to the town of Šahy, and comprises seven districts, namely, (west to east) Dunajská Streda, Galanta, Šaľa, Komárno, Nové Zámky, Levice and Veľký Krtíš. Within this cluster, the biggest towns are Komárno, Dunajská Streda, Kolárovo, Štúrovo, Veľký Meder, Hurbanovo and Šahy. The cluster boundaries correspond to the core areas of support of SMK-MKP and Most-Híd identified in research of Plešivčák (2011) and Madleňák (2012).

The second cluster is located in the southern part of central-eastern Slovakia, in the Lučenec-Košice Depression and the Slovak Karst. It stretches as a belt along the border with Hungary from the eastern part of the Lučenec district, crossing south areas of the Rimavská Sobota, Revúca and Rožňava districts, with small southwestern part of the Košice-okolie district marking its eastern border. Biggest towns within this cluster are Filákov, Tornaľa and Jesenské. The municipalities in this cluster have a considerably lower population than the other two clusters.

² Since LISA delimits clusters based on statistical significance susceptible to the level of analysis and scale of units, we emphasize caution when interpreting the precise cluster boundaries. For instance, many towns that include significant Hungarian minority population and experienced relatively higher support for Szövetség-Alliancia, such as Šamorín, Galanta, Šaľa, Nové Zámky, Želiezovce, Rimavská Sobota, Rožňava, and Moldava nad Bodvou, belong to non-significant cluster, a result that might be influenced by the specifics of statistical calculations.

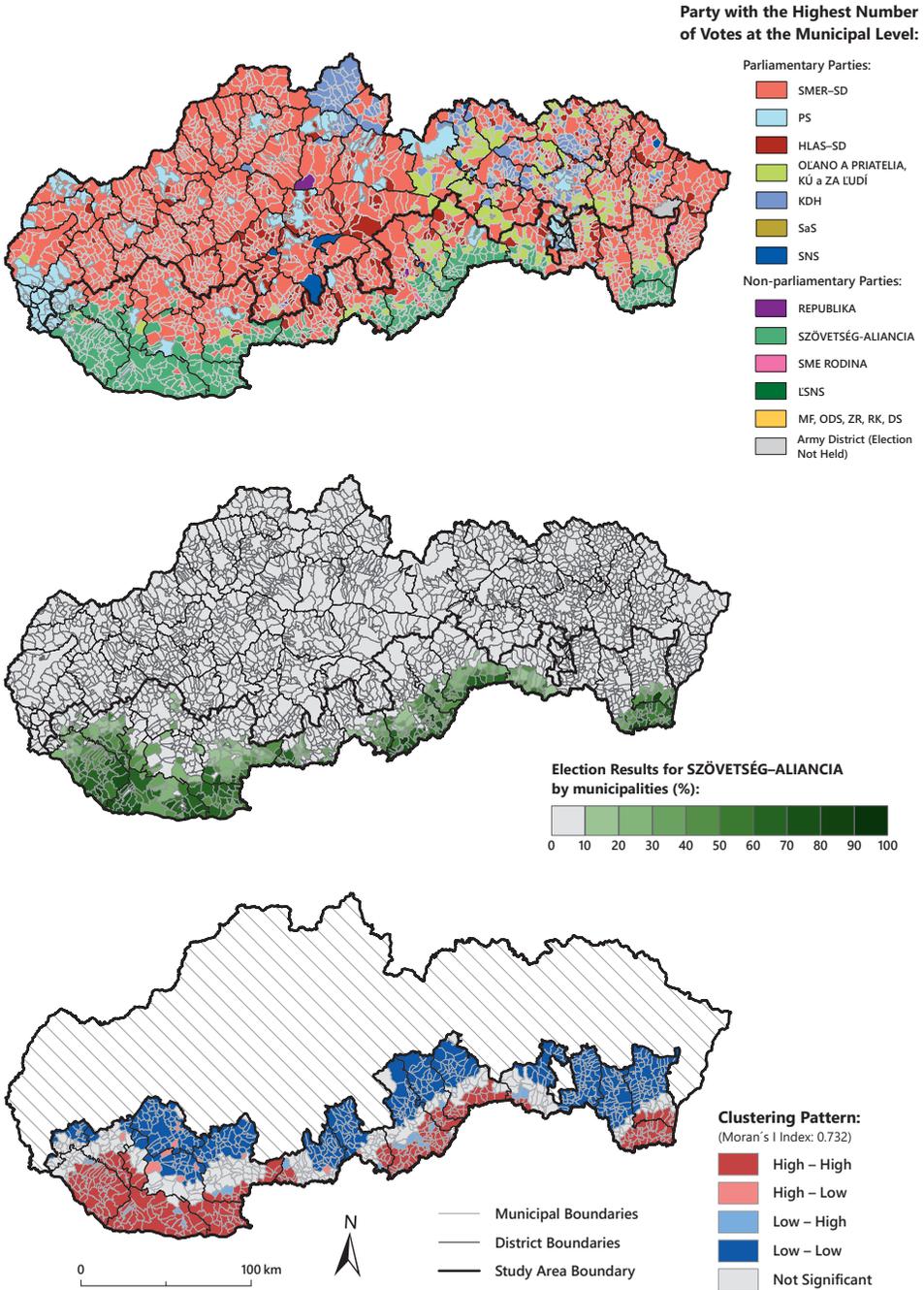


Fig. 3 – Election winners, results of Szövetség-Aliancia, and LISA analysis of Szövetség-Aliancia's support in the 2023 parliamentary election

The third and the smallest cluster of the high support for Szövetség-Aliancia is located in the Eastern Slovak Lowland, mainly in the area between the rivers Bodrog and Tisa. The main part of this cluster is located in the Trebišov district with a small part overstretching to the southern part of the Michalovce district. Towns belonging to this cluster are Kráľovský Chlmec, Veľké Kapušany and Čierna nad Tisou. Similarly to the previous, this cluster has mainly rural characteristics.

Worth highlighting are also outliers to the given pattern. Coloured pink in Figure 3 are ethnic Hungarian municipalities surrounded by areas with a higher proportion of ethnic Slovaks. Similarly, many outliers coloured light blue are ethnic Slovak municipalities in areas predominantly inhabited by ethnic Hungarians. Municipalities where electoral support for Szövetség-Aliancia was low due to the local success of other Hungarian minority parties or Slovak majority parties also belong to this category.

6.2. Ethnicization of electoral support for Szövetség-Aliancia

With regard to the effect of ethnicization, Figure 4 displays a graph of strong and positive correlation between the proportions of Szövetség-Aliancia's support and self-declared Hungarian nationality in municipalities of southern Slovakia. This evidence indicates that support for the party corresponds to the premises of ethnic voting. Interestingly, the regression curve has a character of the quadratic function, which indicates a relationship slightly other than linear. Adjusted R-Square of the quadratic regression curve is 0.920, while it would be 0.914 for the linear relationship. Such quadratic growth suggests a certain contextual effect beyond the examined ethnic structure, even though our quantitative analysis does not allow us to determine what type of contextual effect it is (see also Rodon, Guinjoan 2018).

The linear OLS regression model (Table 3) generally confirms the dominant effect of self-declared Hungarian nationality for explaining Szövetség-Aliancia's support. We present two statistical models: In model 1 the variable of Hungarian nationality was omitted, while it was included in the full model 2 to complement the effects of other predictors. This model 2 is thereby crucial for the comprehensive interpretation of individual effects. The results show that the Hungarian nationality variable had by far the greatest effect on support for Szövetség-Aliancia (standardized beta coefficient = 0.933). Specifically, when the proportion of people declaring Hungarian nationality increases by 1 percentage point (pp) in a municipality, the share of Szövetség-Aliancia's support will increase on average by 0.752 pp, all other variables constant. Adding this variable to the model also significantly increased the total explanatory power measured by adjusted R-Square from 45% (model 1) to 92% (model 2), all while improving the quality of the model

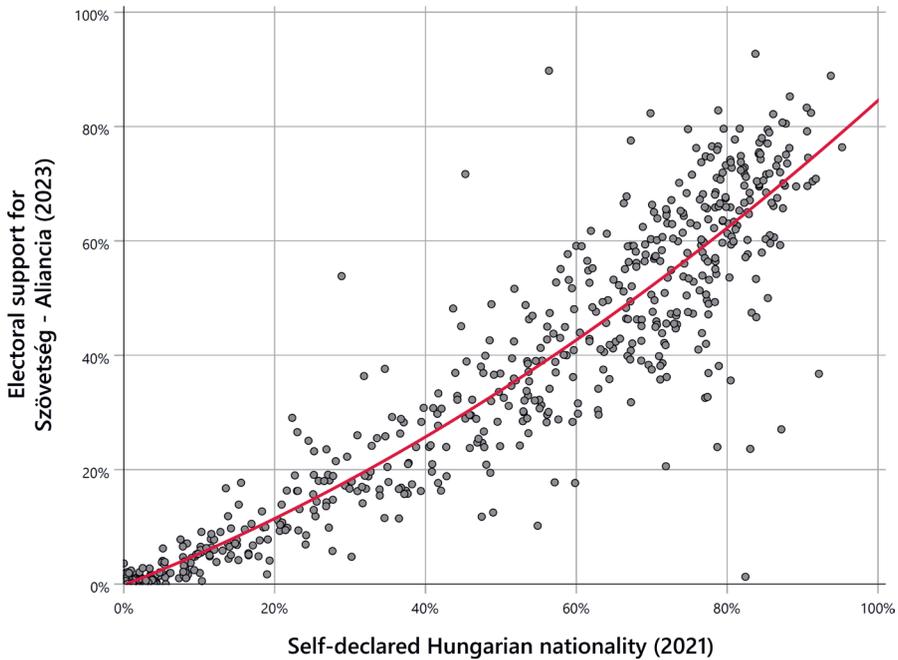


Fig. 4 – Correlation between the proportions of Szövetség-Aliancia gains and Hungarian minority in municipalities within the study area

evidenced by a considerable decrease in the AICc value. Controlling for the potential spatial non-stationarity in the effects of predictors measured by GWR, we can conclude that the effect of Hungarian nationality is strikingly uniform across the entire study area. This is evidenced in the fact that using GWR did not result in increasing the model's explanatory power (92%), nor did it improve the model's quality measured by AICc. In contrast, using GWR in model 1 without Hungarian nationality resulted in a profound improvement of its explanatory power, which means that other predictors have selective and non-stationary effects. Finally, the uniform effect of Hungarian nationality across the study area also led to the disappearance of clustering in regression residuals measured by Moran's I spatial autocorrelation (from 0.5 to 0.1). Such a decisive effect of the Hungarian nationality variable largely corresponds to the results presented by Kostelecký (2001) on the determinants of support for the coalition of Hungarian minority parties in the 1990s. It confirms that a large part of the Hungarian minority population keeps articulating their interests through ethnic parties, maintaining the politicization of ethno-national cleavage.

While the effects of other variables were significant and moderately strong in model 1 (without Hungarian nationality), they all slumped in explanatory

Table 3 – Standardized beta coefficients from linear regression model between the 2023 election support for Szövetség-Alliancia and respective predictor variables

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Hungarian nationality	–	0.933***
Reformed Church	0.494***	0.057***
University education	-0.185***	-0.043**
Distance from Bratislava	-0.337***	0.030**
Unemployment rate	0.134***	-0.029*
Age 65+	0.185***	0.013
Number of inhabitants	0.103***	0.014
Election turnout	-0.150***	0.025
Adjusted R2	0.448	0.918
AICc	8,911.824	6,978.893
Adjusted R2 (GWR)	0.772	0.922
AICc (GWR)	8,221.094	6,940.474
Moran's I (residuals)	0.494	0.121
N	1,012	1,012

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

power and some even lost significance after this variable was added in model 2. This confirms the dominance of the Hungarian nationality variable and merely supplemental effects of other predictors. Of those, the proportion of Calvinists (Reformed Church) had the strongest effect (0.494 in model 1). This is likely because in Slovakia, this denomination is specific to the Hungarian ethnic minority. Its coefficient in model 2 (0.057) even indicates that there is a weak but significant effect of Calvinist faith beyond the ethno-national cleavage. A possible explanation is the current political profile of Szövetség-Alliancia, which adopted a Christian-conservative rhetoric during the election campaign.

Similarly to the previous variable, the effect of higher education decreased in model 2, but it remained significant (-0.044). Its negative direction means that a higher proportion of people with university education in a municipality results in lower support for Szövetség-Alliancia. Such direction arguably results from the party's rhetoric and campaigning with regard to populism, nationalist value attitudes, and lack of general strategy (Gyurovszky 2025).

The effects of distance from Bratislava and unemployment rate, with Beta coefficients of -0.336 and 0.134 respectively in model 1, developed in an opposite direction following the introduction of Hungarian nationality in model 2. In general, support for Szövetség-Alliancia moderately declines with increasing distance from Bratislava. This may be surprising, but it is due to the greater concentration

of the Hungarian minority in the areas of south-western Slovakia, which are relatively close to the capital. In model 2, a weak positive (and significant) effect was observed. Apparently, when controlling for the distribution of the Hungarian minority, support for Szövetség-Aliancia slightly increased with growing distance from Bratislava. In the Hungarian minority areas in the vicinity of Bratislava, the right-liberal parties such as Most-Híd, but also Slovak right-wing liberals like SaS or SDKÚ-DS, have historically achieved higher election gains than populist parties (Madleňák 2012). The 2023 parliamentary election then saw the rise of PS in this suburban area.

Regarding the unemployment rate, introduction of the Hungarian nationality variable in model 2 meant that the coefficient decreased to -0.029 , although it remained significant. Beyond the effect of ethnicity, Szövetség-Aliancia was marginally more successful in municipalities with lower unemployment. This may be surprising given that similar populist-nationalist ethnic parties electorally exploit areas with higher unemployment (e.g. Rink, Phalet, Swyngedouw 2009), but the party's centre-right economic positioning may have contributed to this outcome.

6.3. Unevenness of the Hungarian minority's electoral mobilization

The evidence presented in the previous section shows a significant extent of ethnic voting for Szövetség-Aliancia. This fact does not necessarily mean, however, that it is supported by all people from the Hungarian minority community, as many defy electoral mobilization in the party's favour. The spatial distribution of voter turnout in the 2023 election is illustrated in Figure 5, where municipalities are coloured deriving from the state-wide mean of 68.51%. Clearly, a below-average voter turnout is concentrated in the municipalities with a significant ethnic Hungarian population. Electoral participation in the study area was 61.46%, but if we look at the municipalities where the Hungarian minority accounted for more than 30%, the turnout further dropped to 56.87%. This trend is also confirmed by the Pearson correlation between voter turnout and the nationality structure in municipalities within the study area. For the Hungarian minority, the relationship was -0.312 , but for Slovak nationality, it was clearly positive (0.376).

It is evident from the LISA analysis in Figure 5 that the concentration of high voter turnout is clustered in predominantly Slovak ethnic areas and the suburban areas of Bratislava and Košice. In contrast, there are two big clusters of low voter turnout, one in the central part of southern Slovakia and one in eastern Slovakia. Both of them to a large extent overlap with two clusters of high electoral support for Szövetség-Aliancia. However, both clusters of low turnout stretch more to the north, to ethnically heterogeneous areas. The third cluster of high support for Szövetség-Aliancia in Žitný ostrov (Csallóköz) belongs mostly to

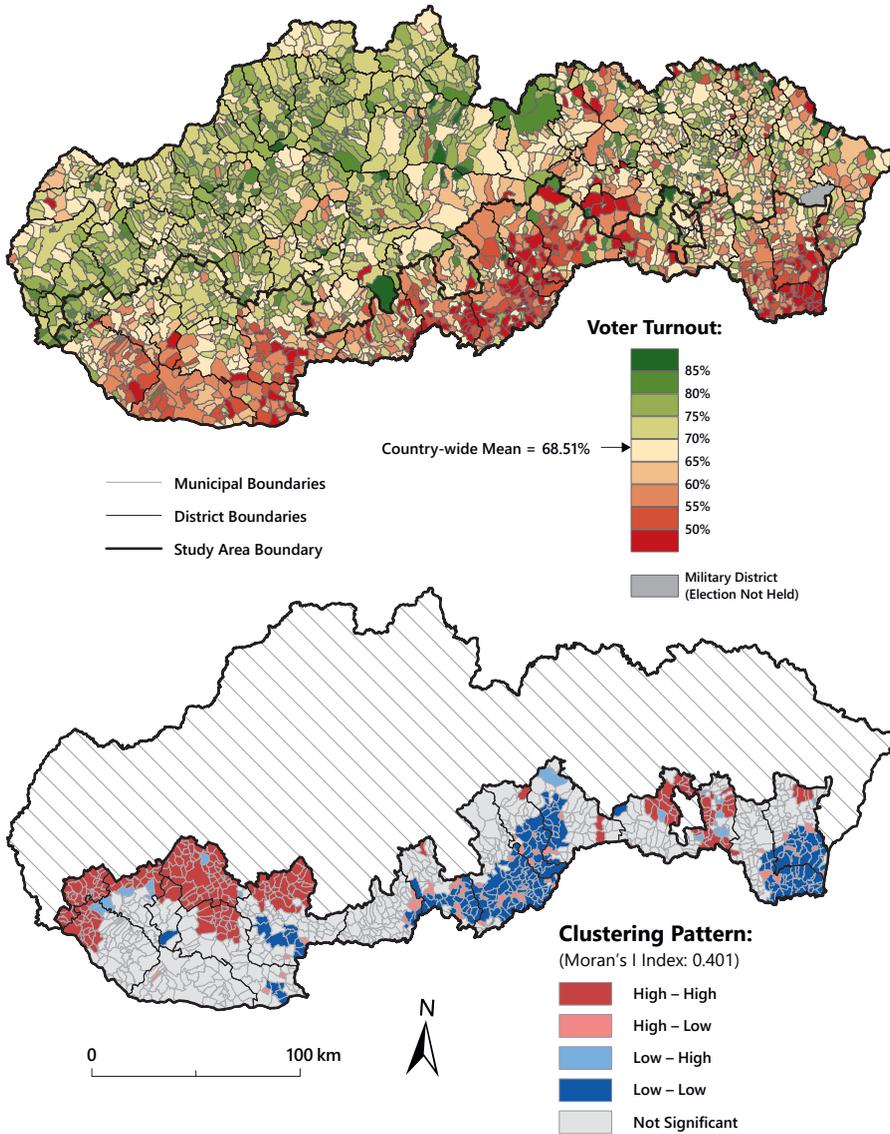


Fig. 5 – Voter turnout and its spatial clustering (LISA) in the 2023 parliamentary election

the non-significant category of clustering. We argue that this may result from the scope of analysis consisting of 16 districts in southern Slovakia. Should the whole Slovakia be included as a study area, the low clusters would include all Hungarian-minority areas. This finding is in accordance with the conclusion of Kevický and Suchánek (2023) that higher electoral participation in municipalities

with a higher proportion of ethnic Slovaks indicates lower interest in elections among national minorities.

If we move beyond the groupist categories of analysis, however, the evidence indicates that electoral mobilization is actually lowest in ethnically heterogeneous areas. The correlograms in Figure 6 show the relationship between voter turnout and (a) the proportion of Hungarian national minority and (b) the index of fractionalization in municipalities of southern Slovakia. As suggested, the correlation between turnout and Hungarian nationality is generally negative, but it cannot be said that participation simply decreases with the increasing representation of the Hungarian minority in a municipality. Instead, the regression curve resembles quadratic rather than linear function. Apparently, turnout is highest in ethnically non-Hungarian areas. It then drops with the gradual increase in the proportion of Hungarian nationality, but it again slowly rises in municipalities where the Hungarian minority makes up more than 60% of inhabitants.

To provide a more detailed insight, we calculated the index of ethnic fractionalization (Fearon 2003), both in its original quantitative form and as a categorical variable (with a margin of 0.33). Moreover, in the category of ethnically homogeneous areas, we distinguished ethnic Hungarian and Slovak municipalities. The outcome (Figure 6b) confirms the previous assumption that ethnically heterogeneous areas in particular experience lower turnout (57.6% on average) than both homogeneously ethnic Slovak and Hungarian municipalities (66.2% and 60.5%, respectively). ANOVA confirmed significant differences between all these three categories. Observed differences in the degree of electoral participation therefore result not only from ethnic differences per se but also from a complex ethnic structure and, arguably, inter-ethnic contact in heterogeneous municipalities. Returning to the LISA map in Figure 5, this evidence is supported by clustering of low electoral support in the ethnically heterogeneous areas of Levice or Galanta districts.

Given that most individuals of Hungarian nationality in Slovakia live in municipalities with a heterogeneous ethnic structure, this finding can largely explain the failure of Szövetség-Aliancia to enter the parliament. Moreover, it indicates that many ethnic Slovaks living in these mixed municipalities are also more susceptible to abstaining from elections than those in ethnically homogeneous areas.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The main finding of our analysis is that although the Szövetség-Aliancia's vote is spatially concentrated and predominantly ethnicized in a sense that there is a profound effect of ethnic cleavage behind the party support, this ethnic voting is far from being uniformly community-wide. Considerable parts of the Hungarian

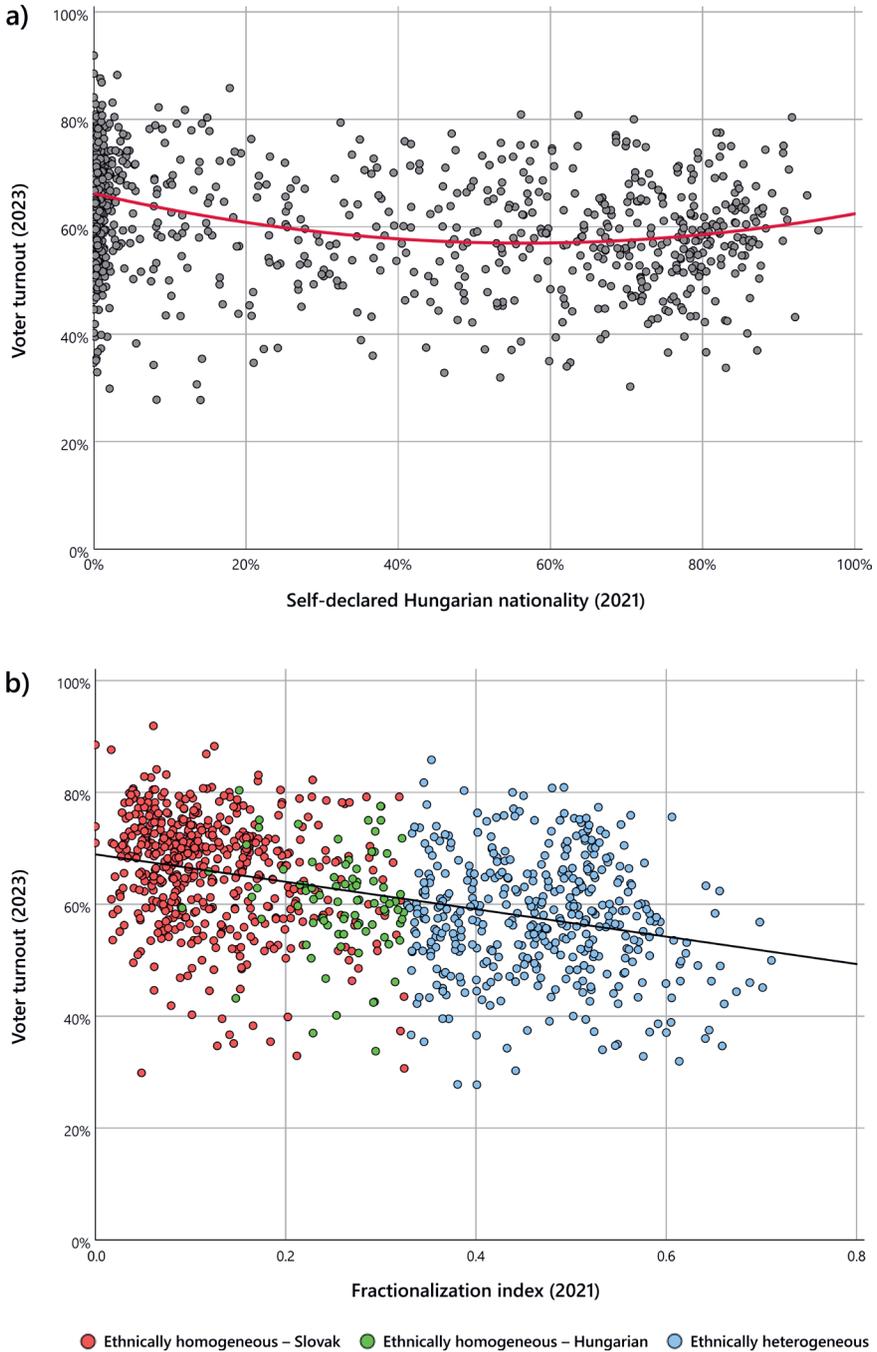


Fig. 6 – Correlation between voter turnout in the 2023 election and ethnic composition of municipalities in the study area

minority population did not mobilize in favour of the party and instead abstained from the election altogether. These segments did not support any alternative liberal minority party, as premised by the nested competition model, nor did they support any radical alternative, as proposed by the model of ethnic outbidding, because the Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia do not follow the outbidding logic. If contextualized within similar cases of national minority regions and parties across Europe, it is clear that the Hungarian minority in Slovakia is somewhat specific, and to understand its preferences and behaviour, the nested competition model must be conceptually broadened. Moreover, voting abstentions do not seem to be random, as we identified a pattern where particularly ethnically mixed municipalities experienced lower participation. This evidence resembles a specific form of differential abstentions known from other cases of national minority regions in Europe (e.g. Liñeira, Vallès 2014). It is also consistent with other findings that suggest ethnic heterogeneity is associated with lower voter turnout (e.g. Förster 2018). Although this literature typically attributes lower turnout to isolation and lower social capital in these areas, we discuss several alternative explanations of this phenomenon.

Firstly, the recent developments of the political-ideological positioning among parties in Slovakia, resembling the trends in a large part of today's Europe (e.g. Rodríguez-Pose 2018), put the increasing emphasis on ethno-nationalist campaigning. Such chauvinistic mobilization, however, contrasts with the experiences of inter-ethnic encounters in many mixed municipalities (e.g. Valentine 2008), which may deter people from voting nationalists. In particular, the positioning of Szövetség-Aliancia as a populist-nationalist and kin-state oriented party as well as recent discreditation of liberal Most-Híd party members due to their governmental cooperation with populist Smer-SD and ultra-nationalist SNS caused that many Hungarian minority voters could not find a party that would properly represent their interests (Lampl 2023, Gyurovszky 2025). These abstentions also occurred despite the targeted mobilization efforts by Slovak liberal and progressive parties.

In addition, Mészárosová-Lampl (2019) and Lampl (2023), citing opinion polls conducted by the Forum Minority Research Institute in 2019 and 2023, point to a general sense of disinterest in politics among some people from the Hungarian minority. This apathy likely results from a disappointment with the divisions within the Hungarian political representation, mistrust in politicians, polarization of society, and a feeling that parties do not properly represent interests of the respondents' region. Many Hungarian minority voters would prefer a single ethnic minority party to represent their interests or a cooperation between the Hungarian minority parties in Slovakia. This unity was initially supposed to be brought by Szövetség-Aliancia, but it eventually failed to fulfil its position as an inclusive party. It instead recently radicalized in terms of its ethno-national positioning and became more oriented towards Orbán's Fidesz. Nevertheless, there are

no survey data available to conclude that such disaffiliation of the minority voters is specific to those living in ethnically heterogeneous municipalities in Slovakia. Further research is needed to elaborate on this finding.

From the perspective of the nested competition model, it is evident that minorities are indeed frequently divided over political issues, with some systematically avoiding radicalizing rhetoric, thus disproving the ethnic outbidding model. At the same time, the demand-side voter preferences may be at odds with the supply-side party offers, so these distinct minority preferences are not necessarily expressed by voting for another, more liberal party. For this reason, we recommend expanding the scope of the nested competition model to account for this potential scenario.

Finally, we admit that other reasons behind such systematic demobilization of the electorate cannot be completely ruled out. This especially concerns the effect of peripherality, particularly if we look at the intra-regional differentiation of the study area. A large part of the territory which the Hungarian minority in Slovakia inhabits directly correlates with the peripheral location. This can be seen in the delimitation of peripheral regions of Slovakia according to Halás (2014) or Stražovec (2024), where the areas in the southern part of eastern Slovakia, both ethnically Hungarian and heterogeneous, suffer from cumulative peripherality. This is confirmed by Kevický and Suchánek (2023), who associate lower electoral participation with increased unemployment and lack of university education, two typical aspects of peripherality.

Our analysis contributed to the insight into the ethnicization of voting support for Szövetség-*Aliancia* and the inequality of electoral mobilization in favour of the party within the minority community. We are nevertheless aware that such exploratory statistical analysis cannot authoritatively explain motivations and reasoning behind voters' preferences and behaviour, both in the ethnically heterogeneous areas and beyond. Future research should address these questions in detail if we are about to understand not only the prospects of the Hungarian minority and its political representation in Slovakia but also the opportunities for improved socio-political integration in the country.

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