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Dimensionality of Party Politics of Foreign Policy: Spatial Modeling of Slovakia's National Council

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Recent scholarship on parties and foreign policy argues that foreign policy preferences seem to be split along the same lines as the general policy disputes. We use spatial modeling to analyze whether this is indeed the case. Drawing on the unique complete sample of all votes in the Slovakia's National Council from 2002 through 2019, our results suggest that the split over foreign policy is much smaller than the general policy divide. Contrary to expectations, this split does not follow the left–right distinction. The results suggest that the government–opposition split remains in the foreign policy as well.

Introduction

The recent surge in the scholarship on the party politics of foreign policy highlighted the relevance of studying the partisan dimension of foreign policy in democratic countries. Wherever it plays out—be it in military deployments, alliance commitments, or foreign aid—party politics represents important aspects of foreign policy today (Milner and Tingley 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015, 2017; Wagner et al. 2017; Plagemann and Destradi 2018; Mello and Saideman 2019; Wenzelburger and Böller 2020). Major data collection efforts have been launched in the search for new data to analyze partisan politics and foreign policy (Ostermann et al. 2020). This research follows up on the research that pioneered the work on party ideology and foreign policy (Thérien and Noel 2000; Rathbun 2004; Hofmann 2013).

This research challenges the previously held view that (party) politics stops at the “water’s edge”—that there is broad parliamentary support for foreign policy, which is often driven by concerns related to the international system in any case (this view is characteristic of the realist school of international relations, but for a classical statement in comparative politics, see Keman 1986). Recently, scholars have used numerous ways to study how domestic politics continues to play out in foreign policy, for example, by examining national legislatures as well as supranational legislatures such as the European Parliament (Raunio and Wagner 2020). It

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has become an accepted fact that the division mainly runs along left–right policy spectrum (Rathbun 2004; Mello 2014; Wagner et al. 2018). Domestic contestation of foreign policy is similar to the policy contestation in general—in other words, foreign policy is contested along the same lines as public policy in general (Raunio and Wagner 2020).

In this paper, we test these two claims using a method that has been established in the study of legislative politics, but has thus far not been used to study party politics of foreign policy. We use spatial voting modeling, which allows us to place individual legislators in the policy space and thereby study the splits among them. We use this method to study two questions—whether the left–right division defines the policy divergence in foreign policy and whether the divisions seen generally are replicated in foreign policy. To conduct the analysis, we rely on a newly collected dataset of roll call data of all parliamentary votes in the National Council of Slovak Republic (*Národná Rada Slovenskej Republiky*) from 2002 through 2019. Slovakia uses a unicameral parliamentary system and the National Council (NC) enjoys a comparatively strong power when it comes to foreign policy (Peters, Wagner, and Deitelhoff 2010; Wagner, Peters, and Glahn 2010). Compared to many Western European legislatures, the NC votes on more topics, including foreign policy. Slovakia’s political system is characterized by the “stable instability” of the partisan system (Haughton 2014) where some parties survive election after election, while other new ones appear and then quickly disappear (Gyarfášová and Henderson 2018). Slovakia’s institutional features make it a typical case of a post-communist European political system (Deegan-Krause 2013).

Our contribution to the existing scholarship is twofold. First, we introduce a new method to study the party politics of foreign policy, and use it to reanalyze the emerging consensus in the scholarship on party politics of foreign policy. Second, since research on the topic has so far focused on Western Europe, we look at a new case, the case of Slovakia.

Our results suggest that the left–right division is not always dominant; in Slovakia, the government versus the opposition split is arguably more relevant. We find that this split not only characterizes the domestic politics, but is also present in the voting with respect to foreign policy, though less strongly. We find that left–right dimension does not characterize the split over foreign policy in Slovakia.

In the following section, we review the studies on the party politics of foreign policy and present the theoretical expectations; in the third section, we introduce our method and data; in the fourth section, we present the results and discuss them, and conclude the study with the final section.

Partisanship and Foreign Policy

The existing research on partisanship and foreign policy has focused on numerous fields of foreign policy, including development aid (Thérien and Noel 2000; Wenzelburger and Böller 2020), alliances (Hofmann 2013), multilateralism (Plagemann and Destradi 2018) or the initiation of military conflicts (Palmer, London, and Regan 2004; Arena and Palmer 2009). However, the most extensive scholarship has examined the parliamentary approval of military missions (Mello 2014; Wagner et al. 2017, 2018; Wagner 2020).

The starting point of this research is that foreign policy has become widely contested (Zürn 2014), both by parties and by individual voters (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Scholars have argued that in this contestation, the left–right dimension of the conflict is the decisive one (Wagner et al. 2017). This line of argumentation surmises that similarly to other policy questions, the issues related to foreign policy are subject to the genuine policy differences reflected in the fundamental ideological splits (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). These differences are both material, i.e., how the

resources in the society should be allocated—and ideological, i.e., how we should think about foreign affairs (Wagner et al. 2018).

Findings by Wagner et al. (2017) and subsequent scholars demonstrate that the left–right ideological split is the one which also tends to capture debates about foreign policy, particularly when it comes to security policy and military deployments. However, international relations scholars have found that partisan ideology also influences the attitudes toward international cooperation in general (Aspinwall 2002; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Rathbun 2012; Schneider and Urpelainen 2014). This is partly because the left–right dimension has proven capable of accommodating new dimensions of conflict (Laver and Hunt 1992). As Aspinwall (2002, 86) argues, centrism accepts “interdependence as a *fait accompli*,” which leads to pragmatism related to international cooperation. Parties on the left are wary of international cooperation because they suspect it opens the gates to market forces, whereas parties on the right are afraid of the limitations on the national sovereignty. These motivations become stronger as we move toward the far ends of the policy spectrum (Schori Liang 2007).

As Henderson (2001) argues, the left–right axis provides a starting point to understand the often cross-cutting nature of policy preferences in Central and Eastern Europe as well. In the particular case of Slovakia, Fisher, Gould, and Houghton (2007) argued that Slovakia underwent a “neoliberal turn” exactly in the period under study in the present paper (post-2002), which could lead us to expect the left–right dimension to become more prominent, with a focus on redistribution versus deregulation. Recent research finds the left–right dimension useful for classifying political systems in other post-communist countries (Hájek 2020).¹ Therefore, we hypothesize that the foreign policy votes will be structured along the left–right dimension.

Hypothesis 1: *The split in the votes on foreign policy issues will run primarily along the left–right axis.*

Our second hypothesis is an alternative to the first hypothesis. Recently, scholars have argued that rather than being characterized by a left–right split, the party competition is divided along a liberal-conservative spectrum. This so-called new politics dimension looks at parties as split along the continuum from the green–alternative–left and the traditional–authoritarian–nationalist parties (GAL–TAN continuum) (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). The social dimension was found to be separate from the economic one, and particularly in Central and Eastern European countries, the relationship between the social and economic preferences varies (Rovny 2014). In the particular case of Slovakia, scholars have highlighted that the economic right also tends to be socially more liberal, which is not always the case in Western European countries (Gyárfášová and Henderson 2018).

The impact of the social liberal-conservative dimension as regards foreign policy is more variegated. While in the field of security issues its impact was found to be very limited (Wagner et al. 2017), it was shown to matter significantly in European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2018). It is therefore possible that the social liberal-conservative dimension animates the split vis-à-vis foreign policy.

Hypothesis 2: *The split in the votes on foreign policy issues will run primarily along the liberal-conservative axis.*

Rather than there being an ideological divide, it is conceivable that even in foreign policy, similar to other areas of public policy, there will be a divide between the government and opposition. Political scientists have long recognized that the

¹ Scholars have debated whether the left–right dispute has the same meaning in Western and in Central and Eastern Europe (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Marks et al. 2006). As this dispute is not settled yet, and the literature on parties and foreign policy looks at left–right cleavage, we sidestep this discussion for the moment.

government–opposition divide animates disputes about policy. As [Dewan and Spirling \(2011\)](#) argue, even if the “honest” policy preferences of opposition are close to those of government on a particular issue, voting against the opposition might force concessions. [Hix and Noury \(2016\)](#) found that the government–opposition divide matters more than the left–right divide, and similar results were also found in other settings (see, e.g., [Dewan and Spirling 2011](#); [Godbout and Høyland 2011](#); [Louwerse et al. 2016](#)). Scholars have found a similar split between government and opposition in the study of foreign policy as well ([Howell and Pevehouse 2007](#); [Milner and Tingley 2011](#)).

We will therefore test whether there is a split between government and opposition on the issues related to foreign policy. This hypothesis would oppose the previously held view that the foreign policy is primarily led by considerations related to the international system and that domestic politics does not influence it too much.

Hypothesis 3: *The split in the votes on foreign policy will run between government and opposition.*

Our last hypothesis is related to the exceptionality of foreign policy. In a recent study of European parliament, [Raunio and Wagner \(2020\)](#) demonstrate that the disagreements about foreign policy are not different than disagreements about other areas of public policy. Yet this argument was made in a setting of a supranational legislature, which is different than national legislatures in many respects. To the best of our knowledge, this argument has not been tested in “regular” legislatures. We are therefore going to test this hypothesis as well.

Hypothesis 4: *The split in the votes on foreign policy issues mirrors the one on other policy issues in general.*

Case Selection, Data, and Methods

Our analysis focuses on the analysis of the roll call voting records from Slovakia’s NC. NC is the only legislative chamber in Slovakia. We select Slovakia as a typical case of a country with relatively strong parliamentary powers over foreign policy. The NC is obliged to agree with the accession to international treaties (crucial for our analysis) in line with Article 7, paragraph 4 of the Constitution.

When it comes to foreign policy, we focus on the agreements with the ratification of international treaties. Ratifications provide for a suitable case for two reasons: firstly, votes on the ratification of international treaties allow for genuine disagreements, as demonstrated by the recent disagreements over the ratification of trade agreements in various European parliaments.² While many of the treaties are not politically salient, some treaties become politically salient unexpectedly.³ At the same time, deployment votes are also not always salient: in most parliaments, agreement on deployment is very high ([Ostermann et al. 2020](#)). Furthermore, beyond large and politically salient conflicts, troop deployments are often small scale and not always in the public eye. Secondly, the ratification of treaties happens more frequently than votes on troop deployments (which are frequently studied by scholars studying party politics of foreign policy) and thus allows for the data modeling using a spatial model (where a minimum of twenty votes per period is required). Because of the parliamentary practice, the NC votes more frequently on foreign policy—the German Bundestag, for example, took only over a dozen roll call votes on treaty ratifications in a comparable period.

²While trade policy is traditionally the competence of the European Union, the so-called mixed trade agreements require ratification in national parliaments, as they include national competencies.

³The word clouds, depicting the topics of the treaty ratifications under study, can be found in the online appendix A. The list of treaties can be found in the online appendix C.

Table 1. Voting descriptives

	All votes				Ratification votes			
	<i>N</i> vote total	<i>N</i> vote analysis	<i>N</i> MPP total	<i>N</i> MPP analysis	<i>N</i> vote total	<i>N</i> vote analysis	<i>N</i> MPP total	<i>N</i> MPP analysis
2002–2006	6,969	2,750	241	222	137	137	221	201
2006–2010	6,065	5,856	176	176	105	105	176	171
2010–2012	2,372	2,240	161	161	41	35	161	150
2012–2016	5,978	5,808	197	197	77	76	194	180
2016–2019	4,302	4,230	191	187	56	56	185	151

We take into account all the votes that took place in the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth legislative period of the NC, and the vast majority of votes in the seventh period, all of which took place between October 15, 2002 and June 27, 2019.⁴ This timeframe covers a period of a relative stabilization in Slovak politics, following the turbulent Mečiar years and anchoring of the country in the EU and NATO was almost complete. The “struggle against Mečiar” stopped being the dominant theme in Slovak politics (using the language of Bakke and Sitter 2005). We split the votes per parliamentary period and identify the votes related to the ratification of international agreements. We take two steps in our analysis: First, we estimate dimensions from the vote data, and thereafter we interpret these dimensions by regressing them against explanatory variables.

To estimate the dimensions and the positions of individual members of parliament (MPs), we use NOMINATE, a scaling method widely used in the study of legislative politics (Poole 2005; Poole and Rosenthal 2017), in its implementation for R (Poole et al. 2008). In line with common practice, lopsided votes (those where the minority is less than 2.5 percent of votes) and infrequently voting MPs (those who voted less than 20 times) are left out of the analysis (Poole 2005). Table 1 gives an overview of the number of MPs and votes in the analysis.

It is important to note that party switching led us to estimate more ideal points for MPs than there are seats in parliament. Slovakia’s political system is characterized by party collapse, which frequently takes place during the legislative period. We therefore treated each MP as unique as long as they stayed within the same caucus. If the MP switched caucus or became independent, we counted that as a new, unique MP.⁵ This is why our count of MPs per period exceeds 150, the number of seats in the parliament.

The number of dimensions estimated by the analysis was set at two for each period, as scree plots indicated that more dimensions would not yield much more explanatory power (Poole 2005). For each dimension, the model requires the most conservative end of the scale to be determined manually. This was set at one MP for the most right-wing party in that legislative period according to the Comparative Manifesto Project’s right-left dimension indicator (RILE), which estimates the left–right position of each party on the basis of the party manifesto (Volkens et al. 2019).

As the two dimensions from the NOMINATE analysis are estimated solely from roll call data, they have no inherent substantive meaning.⁶ To interpret the meaning of the two dimensions, we regress the estimated positions of each MP on the dimensions with their left–right orientation, liberal–conservative orientation and government–opposition status. To code the left–right dimension of the MP’s party,

⁴The votes from the first and second legislative period are not readily available for scraping and processing.

⁵We disregard votes on internal parliamentary workings at the beginning of each parliamentary period, since partisanship is not formally established for them yet.

⁶Beyond the conservative end.

we use the RILE indicator from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2019). To code the social liberal–conservative dimension, we use the GAL-TAN data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Bakker et al. 2015; Polk et al. 2017).⁷ We also code whether the MP’s party was in the governing coalition or in the opposition.⁸ We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with party-level clustering of standard errors and analyze each period separately. Given the small number of parties (up to nine), multi-level modeling methods are not suitable. We also regress data one party-level variable at a time, since adding multiple variables would make it difficult to interpret any results.

Results

Before embarking on testing our hypotheses, let us look at the positioning of the MPs in the policy space. Figure 1 demonstrates the positioning of the MPs in the policy space across the individual legislative periods.

Across the studied time frame, the first dimension appears to differentiate between the coalition and opposition parties quite neatly when it comes to overall votes, but much less so when it comes to the foreign policy votes. On foreign policy, we see very little polarization across the periods. The only potential exception appears to be the period from 2012 to 2016, but it is important to note that in that period, Direction—Social Democracy (SMER-Sociálna Demokracia; SMER) was the sole governing party and at the same time the only left-wing party in the parliament.⁹

In the period 2002–2006, we see parties occupying the whole space in foreign policy voting, and not really clustering. This might be a result of a rather turbulent time when numerous parliamentary caucuses fell apart (or lost substantive number of MPs) and opposition accused the governing coalition of “vote buying” (Učeň 2006).

But in the period 2006–2010, we do not see a left–right differentiation, neither in general nor in foreign policy. However, it is important to recall the political situation at the time: the governing coalition at that time included left-wing SMER, as well as center-right Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS; see Malová and Učeň 2007). If anything, we observe a government versus opposition dynamic here.

The government versus opposition dynamic is also clearly observable in the period 2010–2012: on the left, we observe the governing parties, whereas on the right one we see the left-wing SMER and the far-right SNS. The subsequent period reflects the reverse, as discussed above. Last but not least, the most recent period 2016–2019 demonstrates again the split between the government (composed of SMER, SNS, and center-right Most-Híd), and the opposition parties, which included center-right as well as far-right parties (Baboš and Malová 2017).

These results are largely similar to the splits present in the general voting pattern, although we observe much stronger polarization there (also demonstrated by strong alignment of the points on the perimeter). Upon visual inspection, these suggest two phenomena: that the voting is rather polarized and often happens along strict lines (though these tend to be defined by a government–opposition divide rather than an ideological one); and secondly, that the split over foreign

⁷We use 2002 CHES data to analyze the votes from 2002 to 2006; 2006 CHES data to analyze 2006–2010 votes, 2010 CHES to analyze 2010–2012, 2014 CHES to analyze 2012–2016, and 2017 CHES to analyze 2016–2019.

⁸See the online appendix B for descriptive statistics of all variables.

⁹Throughout this paper, we refer to SMER as a left-wing party, because it is classified as such by major databases, such as the Comparative Manifesto Project; and it is a member of the Party of European Socialists and the European Parliament’s Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats fraction. However, local experts often highlight many aspects that distinguish SMER from Western European left-wing parties; in fact, SMER is on the TAN end of the GAL-TAN axis.

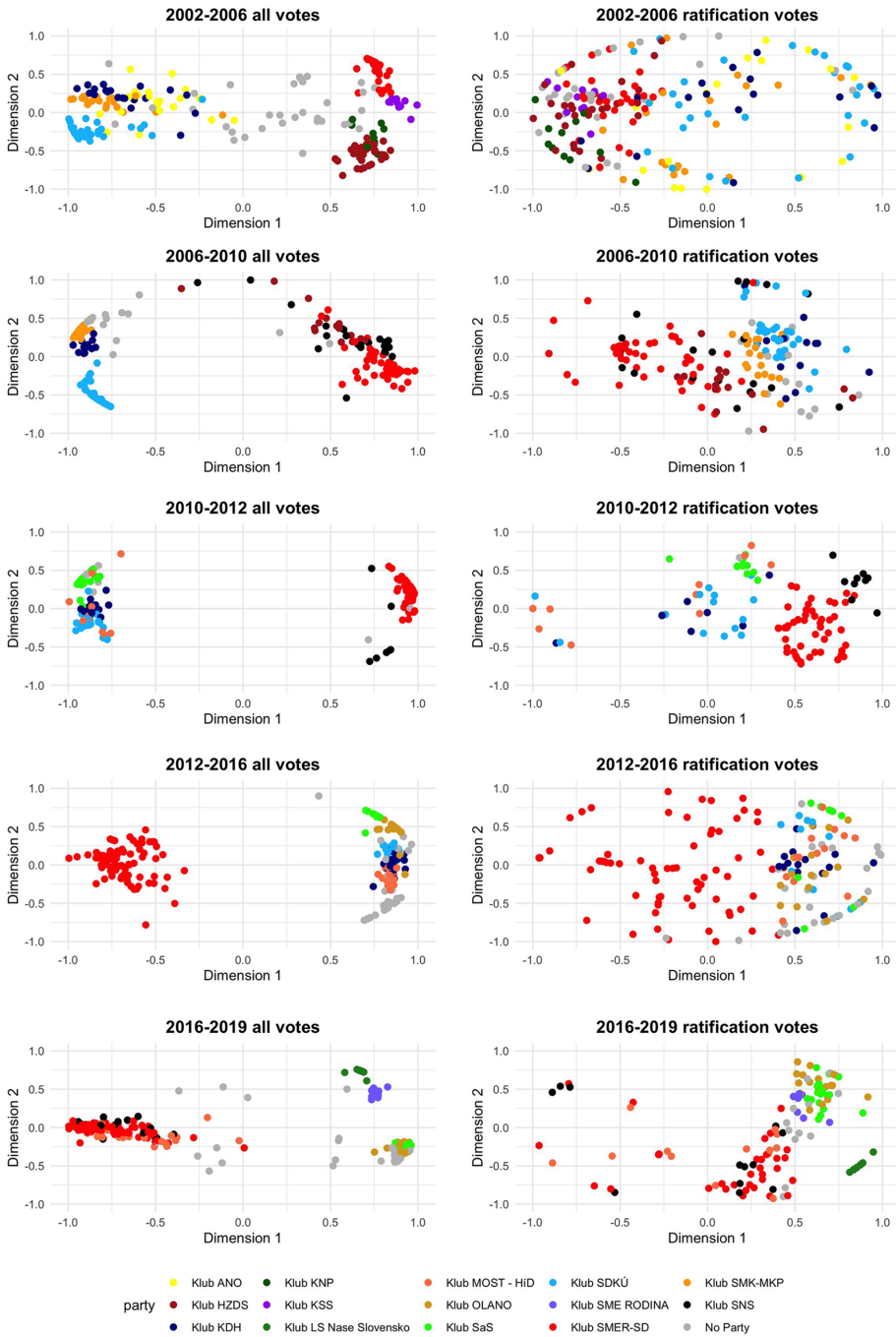


Figure 1. Estimated positions of MPs on two dimensions per parliamentary period. *Note.* For all votes in parliament and for ratification votes separately.

policy mirrors the split over general policy debates (albeit with a much lower level of polarization).

The polarization of voting on general policy questions can be demonstrated by the observation of the phenomenon of points appearing aligned too closely along the circle with the radius of one from the center (Rosenthal and Voeten 2004;

Poole and Rosenthal 2017). This phenomenon arises when voting takes place along strong (usually ideological) lines, as the model is able to overpredict individual ideal points. However, in the area of foreign policy, which is of key interest to us, we do not see it in periods other than 2002–2006 (and even then, it does not happen along ideologically uniform lines) and therefore we do not consider it as an invalidation of our method. However, we might interpret the absence of alignment around the perimeter as the absence of a strict (ideological) split over foreign policy. This finding tentatively suggests less contestation of foreign policy compared to general public policy, although the contestation is still clearly observable.

We now move toward the interpretation of the two dimensions. To interpret the meaning of the two dimensions, we regress the scores on each of the two dimensions on three independent variables. Table 2 shows the results of the quantitative analysis. Models 1, 2, and 3 analyze the first dimension related to the analysis of the full data; models 4, 5, and 6 are related to the second dimension of the same data; models 7, 8, and 9 analyze the first dimension of the foreign policy-related data; models 10, 11, and 12 the second dimension of the foreign-relations-related data.

One of the most obvious results is that ideological dimensions—whether left–right or liberal–conservative—are almost completely absent, a result which we had already observed. Instead, we see a rather strong government–opposition dimensionality, which is also reflected when it comes to the foreign policy votes, albeit with less strength. The left–right dimension is overall not statistically significant, with the exception of period 2010–2012 on foreign policy and period 2012–2016 in overall votes. The liberal–conservative dimension is not statistically significant except for overall votes in 2010–2012 and foreign policy votes in 2012–2016. However, two important caveats should be noted here: Firstly, the substantive relevance of the ideological dimension is negligible in both cases. A move by one standard deviation on the left–right ideology dimension would mean a change in the ideal point by less than 0.4 points on a scale from -1 to 1 . Secondly, as mentioned above, in the 2012–2016 period, the left–right dimension mirrored the government–opposition dimension.¹⁰ The coefficients related to the importance of the government–opposition axis are lower in the case of foreign policy compared to overall votes, indicating that the split over the foreign policy is smaller compared to overall policy. We find that the politics does not end at the border, but it does get less polarized.

The results support the arguments introduced before, which posit that the left–right polarization in the policy space of the post-communist countries is less pronounced compared to the Western democracies (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Henderson 2001). We similarly find the lack of structuring of political space on foreign policy along the left–right axis, which has been commonly found in the study of Western European countries (Wagner et al. 2018; Ostermann et al. 2020). On the contrary, our findings suggest that the government–opposition split—found to be prominent in the study of legislative behavior before—is relevant here as well (Hix and Noury 2016; Louwse et al. 2016). We confirm the findings of Raunio and Wagner (2020) who argue that the splits over the foreign policy mirror those in other policy areas, though we find that the level of polarization in debates about foreign policy is lower than in overall policy debates.

Conclusion

In this paper, we analyzed two questions: whether the foreign policy votes are split along the left–right axis, the social liberal–conservative axis, or the government–opposition axis; and whether the foreign policy votes are split in a similar way as the general policy votes tend to be. We focus on the case of Slovakia, using a newly

¹⁰ As a robustness measure, we reestimated our model without clustering standard errors. Results suggest that the left–right dimension becomes weakly statistically significant, but substantively remains of very limited importance.

Table 2. Substantive meaning of the two dimensions

	Overall votes						Foreign policy votes					
	Model 1(a)	Model 2(a)	Model 3(a)	Model 4(a)	Model 5(a)	Model 6(a)	Model 7(a)	Model 8(a)	Model 9(a)	Model 10(a)	Model 11(a)	Model 12(a)
2002–2006												
Left–right	–0.03			–0.01	–0.04	–0.09	0.02	–0.09	0	0	0	
Gal–Tan		0.1	1.35***			–0.09			–0.80***			0.05
Opposition	0.32	–0.62	–0.70***	0.18	0.28	0.06	–0.43	0.28	0.17**	0.05	0.08	0.03
Intercept	177	177	222	177	177	222	160	160	201	160	160	201
N												
2006–2010												
Left–Right	–0.02	–0.03		0			0.01	0.05	0	0		
Gal–Tan			–1.45***		0.1	–0.08			0.51***		0	0.11
Opposition	–0.23	0.03	0.62***	0.01	–0.53	0.18	0.15	–0.15	–0.1	0.09	0.05	–0.07
Intercept	161	161	176	161	161	176	157	157	171	157	157	171
N												
2010–2012												
Left–Right	–0.01	0.15		0			0.01	0.05	0.01***		–0.04	
Gal–Tan			1.34***		–0.07*	–0.03			0.61*			–0.02
Opposition	–0.22	–1.16	–0.87***	0.03	0.43*	0.04	0.1	–0.13	–0.11	–0.06	0.33	0.13
Intercept	154	154	161	154	154	161	148	148	150	148	148	150
N												
2012–2016												
Left–Right	0.03	–0.02		0.02***	–0.06		0.02	–0.04	0		–0.07**	
Gal–Tan			1.51***			0.1			0.97***			0.02
Opposition	0.35	0.6	–0.68***	0.04	0.65*	0.03	0.28	0.61	–0.36***	0.03	0.49**	–0.02
Intercept	164	164	197	164	164	197	154	154	180	154	154	180
N												
2016–2019												
Left–Right	0.02	0.02		0	0.12*		0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01	–0.06	
Gal–Tan			1.41***			0.14			0.69***			0.53*
Opposition	0.04	0.03	–0.67***	0.08	–0.81	–0.05	0.3	0.14	–0.03	–0.1	0.4	–0.36
Intercept	163	163	187	163	163	187	138	138	151	138	138	151
N												

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

collected dataset of roll calls of all legislative votes between 2002 and mid-2019, analyzing the data using NOMINATE.

Our results suggest that rather than an ideological split (whether left–right or liberal–conservative), it is the coalition–opposition split that defines foreign policy polarization. This split characterizes voting in general, as well as voting about foreign policy.

There are multiple possible explanations for our finding that the left–right axis matters less in Slovakia. One of them is that the meaning of the left–right axis is different in post-Communist Europe and the existing indices do not correctly capture the competition in the policy space in this region, as was argued before (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Haughton 2014). However, another possible explanation is that in line with findings of other scholars, the government–opposition divide is simply more common than the left–right one (Hix and Noury 2016).

We are aware that our findings are the final say neither on the issue of the dimensionality of foreign policy votes, nor on the issue of similarity between foreign policy and general policy voting alignments. The natural next step would be to conduct a similar analysis on comparative data from another country.

Our results also have larger implications for the research on parties and foreign policy, which has thus far predominantly focused on the security policy. Given that the deployment of military troops is a rare event, and votes on the deployments are often pre-determined, branching out to other areas of foreign policy might be fruitful to increase the future generalizability of the findings. Last but not least, scholars conducting research into party politics of foreign policy should look seriously into the non-Western settings. While insights generated by this research are often cast as generalizable, results from comparative politics studies suggesting peculiarities even within Europe warrant further scrutiny beyond the traditional cases of Western settings.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Foreign Policy Analysis* data archive.

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