

Populism and Fascism in a Slovak Guise

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Buzalka, Juraj. 2023. *Postsedliaci. Slovenský ľudový protest* [Postpeasants: Slovak Popular Protest]. Bratislava: Mamaš, 272 pages.

This is Juraj Buzalka's fourth book.¹ The cover depicts a horse pulling a car against the slope with high mountains on the horizon. The leading Slovak social anthropologist, with a PhD from Halle, put out a collection of essays and journalist pieces that instantly became a bestseller in Slovakia. Obviously, the title of the book, "Postpeasants," is intriguing enough to attract the attention of the broader public. But when we read that what is in between the hardcovers, it becomes obvious that the author has hit in the black with a multitude of nails and hammers.

The main thesis of the book is that in Slovakia the bulk of the population is still today anchored in the countryside and a prosperous Slovakia is impossible without what the author calls "progressive populism." Here he refers to the legacy of Milan Hodža, a Slovak politician who was several times minister and finally the prime minister in pre-war Czechoslovakia. Hodža represented the Republican party of the agrarian and small-holder people, the strongest political party in the first republic of Czechoslovakia (1918–1938). In contrast, the present populists in Slovak politics are, according to Buzalka, reactionary, not very remote from fascists. In today's Slovakia, it is "national pseudoconservatism" that superseded communist industrialization and is opposed to global neoliberalism.

¹ Buzalka's previous books are: *Nation and Religion: The Politics of Commemoration in South-east Poland*. 2007, Berlin: LIT Verlag; *Slovenská ideológia a kríza. Eseje z antropológie politiky*. 2012. Bratislava: Kalligram; *Cultural Economy of Protest in Post-socialist European Union: Village Fascists and their Rivals*. 2020. London: Routledge.

Buzalka proceeds in great style to describe the romantic leadership in Slovak politics as starting from Ľudovít Štúr, today a mythological personage comparable to the Hungarian Lajos Kossuth. But there are other comparisons, with the Hungarian poet Sándor Petöfi or General Milan Rastislav Štefánik, who died under equally mysterious circumstances as Štúr. But Štúr is also a kind of Jánošík, the romantic rebel who is the most popular among Slovak nationalists. The romantic leadership persists till today when paranoid politicians such as Mečiar or Fico follow the picture of Masaryk, Dubček, and Kiska. Buzalka asserts that popular patterns of leadership rest in “one-dimensional version of the evolution of political system” (p. 67). The post-1989 strivings at real liberal democracy in Slovakia did not manage to withdraw from romantic leadership.

Eleven essays and studies, followed by 17 contributions to newspapers, document a very broad expertise of the author in political anthropology and his ability to comment with a sharp tongue or even sarcasm on current events or phenomena. Buzalka is a liberal investigator who debunks the fascizoid populism² of the presently ruling Slovak “social democracy”. When reading his critique of the Slovak political leadership of the last 14 years, I could not resist recalling that NSDAP meant “*national-socialist German workers’ party*” (emphasis mine) and that Italian fascism was a mixture of nationalism and social demagogy. The concept of “contemporary fascism”, introduced by Douglas R. Holmes (2019), appears to Buzalka as very useful for understanding the illiberalism and democratic backsliding so typical for Slovakia, Hungary and many other countries of today. Buzalka applies it to the debunking of “graspers” (in original *chápači*) who, following the bandwagonism of “defenders of peace” of the 1950s, call today for understanding the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russian imperialism. These “useful idiots” (among whom Buzalka counts the leadership of the European Association of Social Anthropologists with its infamous declaration of Spring 2022) are now calling against “dragging” Slovakia into war. “Fico, the inventor of mafioso state” and others in the Slovak politics, managed to sell their “fascizoid idiocies” that the Russian attack on Ukraine was caused by the West, to a third of the Slovaks (p. 251). I had to think of the recent Slovak presidential election in which the winner Peter Pellegrini managed to persuade the majority of voters that he was the

² For a most recent collection on present-day populism, see M. Bernhard, A. Kreppel, and C de la Torre, eds. 2024. *Still the Age of Populism? Re-examining Theories and Concepts*. New York: Routledge.

candidate of “peace” while his liberal opponent Mr Korčok was painted as a proponent of “war.”

The book also addresses the problem of Slovak Catholicism which displays a long anti-democratic tradition that climaxed during the wartime Slovak Republic (1939–1945). When the liberal Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová invited Pope Francis for a visit of Slovakia in 2021, it looked as if the pope comes to support those in the Roman Catholic church who opposed religious fundamentalism and its fight against liberalism. The pope wants, according to Buzalka, to show that also in Slovakia there is an alternative to the reactionary Catholicism. The latter “do not preach the love of the fellow refugees or poor Romanies according to the teaching of Jesus Christ, but clerical pornography, that is interest in the sex of others, its control and subsequent support of insemination of biologically pure and orthodox.” The Pope’s visit can be seen, for the first time, as an evidence of the indispensability of Catholicism in the system of European liberal democracy when universal values of the continent are reason, empathy and tolerance. Unfortunately, one pope’s visit “cannot remove populist conservatism of Robert Fico, ...empty opportunism of Peter Pellegrini up to the ostentatious catholic fascists.” ...“For a few days, with Francis came Christian respect for variety from the position of the guardian of the dominant tradition of the continent, sympathy for the persecuted and trust in human knowledge, even if only in the form of support for vaccination” (p. 239). This Catholicism “is compatible with the liberal order, whatever the populist pseudoconservatives think” (p. 240).

I would like to continue in characterizing many other critical viewpoints of Juraj Buzalka. His wit and penetrative intellect would deserve it. But I am writing this review so that readers are intrigued and would like to read *Postsedliaci* without too much spoon-feeding. That is why I am concluding my exegesis with praise of the index and list of sources as well as a note on the author and two viewpoints of reviewers placed at the very end of the book.

Reference

Holmes, Douglas R. 2019. Fascism at eye level: The anthropological conundrum. *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 84: 62–90.

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