

Slagter, L.J.; Gorczyza, K.; Lanius, L.L.; Schieven, R.; Kremers, Y.; Cid, H.; Poghosyan, E.; Schuerman, T.M.A.R.; Weghorst, S.A.; Zijst, van, E. (2023) Rupture or Rigidity? Slovakia's Status Quo after the Murder of a Journalist.

Rupture or Rigidity?

Approximately five years ago, Slovakia saw the largest manifestation of social dissatisfaction since the Velvet Revolution in 1989 (The Slovak Spectator 2018a). Throughout March 2018, across the whole country, tens of thousands of Slovaks from all ages and all strata of society took to the streets, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico and his government. The protests were sparked by the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová. At the time of his assassination, Kuciak was investigating alleged ties between several high-level Slovakian politicians, businessmen, and the Italian mafia, which the police later stated was the reason for the double homicide (iROZHLAS, 2018). For many Slovaks, this dramatic event served as a wake-up call. They realized the transition to democracy was yet to be completed, and that the 1989 Velvet Revolution required a sequel. As former politician and ex-presidential candidate, František Mikloško, said during one of the 2018 gatherings: “The revolution started by the parents has to be finished by their children” (The Slovak Spectator 2018b). The demonstrations were not without consequences; not long after they ignited, Prime Minister Fico and his administration resigned. However, an actual “revolution”, as proclaimed by Mikloško, never transpired.

In the five years since the killings of Kuciak and his fiancée, no substantial political reform has materialized. In other words, despite Slovakia experiencing the largest demonstrations since the Velvet Revolution, its status quo has managed to maintain itself. In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the Slovakian status quo and its persistence, we traveled to the country's capital, Bratislava. During a four-day field trip – which took place between January 28 and February 1, 2023 – we conducted a variety of expert and street interviews in order to unravel the Slovakian status quo and to elucidate the meaning of the concept in general. In this article, we elaborate on our main findings. On the basis of both existing literature and the results of our field trip, we critically discuss what a status quo actually encompasses and how it maintains itself. In doing so, we particularly focus upon how people have successfully transformed the societal status quo in the past. Does this require rebellion? Does rebellion require rebels? And if so, what does it even mean to be a rebel? Can Ján Kuciak, for instance, be seen as a rebel?

According to those that were close to him, Kuciak probably never saw himself as such; he was a very calm and humble person (Kubániová, 2018). Most of the Slovaks we spoke to agree; he was ‘just doing his job’. But does that refrain him from being a rebel? After all, though Kuciak might not have changed the Slovakia status quo, he at least managed to shake it. His efforts as a journalist and his tragic death remain in the minds of millions of Slovaks, though Kuciak himself would have never intended, and could have never imagined, this dramatic unfolding of events. Perhaps one does not necessarily need to pursue being a rebel in order to be perceived as one. Or as Eva Kubániová (2018), a long-time friend of Kuciak, puts it: “The

history maker is not a person whose name is written in history books. It is a person, who came to the lives of thousands and inspired them to change a little bit of their own history.”

Slovakia's Status Quo after the Murder of a Journalist.

Corruption is a widespread, and serious problem in Slovakian society. Side payments and bribes are common, especially once the public sector is involved. Politicians seek to profit from these easy ways to make money and are not keen to give up these privileges (Hltaky 2023). On the one hand, this corruption problem can be attributed to the remnants of Slovakia's past as the Czechoslovak (Socialist) Republic, where clientelism was common, often resulting in one-party dominance over social and economic life (Crampton 1997, 249). On the other hand, once Slovakia became a democracy through the aforementioned Velvet Revolution in 1989, and its subsequent split-off from the current Czech Republic in 1992, democratic standards in Western Europe had been reduced. Democracy was widely held to be the result, foremostly, of economic development (Przeworski & Limongi 1993; see also Lipset 1959). This minimalist approach towards democracy meant democracy would be reduced to having free elections (Przeworski 1999), as an almost self-evident result of having a free market. Popular control over and interest in politics remained weak throughout Slovak society, especially in rural areas. Kuciak's work showed that prime minister Fico's Social-Democrat Party (SMER) was involved in corruption and had contacts with the Italian mafia group 'Ndrangheta. Despite the protests and the demonstrations sparked by Kuciak's murder, SMER still has a reasonably good chance to get back into government at the next parliamentary elections. Fico, in the meantime, gladly seized the opportunity to shift the attention towards corruption cases involving his political opponents. This just goes to show how widespread the problem was and continues to be. Without a change of political mentality across society in its broadest sense *i.e.* a change of the societal status quo, hopes for a better future remain dim.

The Status Quo and Constitutive Politics

How to address this tension, so evident in Slovakia, between the societal status quo and the forces within that same status quo (though simultaneously placing themselves 'outside' of it) that try to change society for the better? Not only Slovakian society, but political communities in the broad sense, can be characterized by a tension between their constitutive and constituted elements, or by their instituting and their institutionalized aspects. In other words, the forces that try to change society are always confronted by how society is, whilst the state of society is likewise a result of those same forces that once sought to change society. In its constituted or institutionalized aspects, society can, broadly speaking, be regarded as the status quo. The status quo does not only include institutions in the formal sense, rather it also encapsulates the informal institutionalized aspects, including a society's broadly shared mentality towards politics, as well as the largely shared values and beliefs within a society.

The tension between the constitutive and the constituted aspect of a political community has, among many authors, been addressed in different ways by Pierre Rosanvallon (1948-) and Claude Lefort (1924-2010). Rosanvallon (2008 [2006]) positioned the rebel as an emanation of ‘critical sovereignty’ (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 122), vis-à-vis the status quo and the traditional concept of sovereignty. Rosanvallon uses the term critical sovereignty to address one's relation towards the established order *i.e.* the status quo, on the basis of a right to resist. This resistance however has constructive purposes, and can therefore invigorate democracy (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 150-152). Lefort on the other hand focuses upon the symbolic, pre-institutional sphere that is implied in constitutive politics vis-à-vis society's institutionalized aspects (Lefort 2016a [1983]). It is within this pre-institutional sphere that politics in the strong sense of the word takes place *i.e.* where alternatives to the status quo can be developed. Both these perspectives will be elaborated upon in the next sections and will serve to address a theoretical tension we have encountered during our project; can politicians be rebels? From Rosanvallon's perspective, this is very well possible based upon an individual attitude of critical sovereignty. From a Lefortian standpoint meanwhile, this appears to be highly unlikely. This is the result of Lefort's distinction between a symbolic, pre-institutional, and an institutionalized sphere of politics, with politicians apparently having their place within the latter.

Some societies institutionalize their status quo, in a *heteronomous* manner, thus positing the source of law outside of society (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 102). The modern concept of sovereignty is such a heteronomous construct. This concept, as first outlined by Jean Bodin (1530-1596), posits the sovereign as the ‘one’ and ‘undivided’ source of legislative power (Bodin 1992 [1576]), unconstrained by any other worldly authority while legitimized by otherworldly authority. Democracy on the other hand is a perpetual act of *autonomous* societal self-institution (Castoriadis 1987 [1975]), promising sovereignty to the people to govern themselves *i.e.* giving oneself the law. However, the procedural aspects of modern democracy expose ourselves to the (un)comfortable truth that ‘the people’ is the democratic fiction *par excellence*. Its alleged pre-political unity disintegrates once its constituent parts withdraw themselves in the dusk of the voting booth, paralyzing Minerva's owl before its flight has even started. Rather, ‘the people’ acts as the source of radical alternatives to the status quo, alternatives that are simultaneously radically incompatible with one another. This already shows that democracy cannot be reduced to its electoral-representative system (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 169). Democratic societies are those within which attitudes of critical sovereignty can feature most prominently, as the status quo can be challenged via the institutionalization, and thus the acceptance, of conflict. Concurrently, ‘the people’ minimally reproduces a part of the status quo by mandating the legislative power in a democratic election.

Rosanvallon analyzes the contemporary disenchantment with democracy, where the constitutive role of the people is reduced to mere electoral negativity *i.e.* protest-voting, instead of sincere attempts to change the societal status quo for the better. Such disenchantment may very well play a role in Slovakia's current status quo, especially given the fact that once disenchantment with democracy grows, so does tolerance of corruption (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 14; see also Moreno 2003). Rosanvallon, therefore, argues democracy is in dire need

of counter-democracy, a political form of its own kind (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 8). This implies an attitude of civic vigilance on the basis of a right to resist, in order to oblige governments to pay attention to social needs. After all, “who will guard the guards themselves?” (Juvenal, 1st-2nd century CE: “quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”). Counter-democracy, as an organized form of distrust (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 6), entails the aforementioned attitudes of critical sovereignty. It serves to emphasize that democracy essentially is a self-critical, and self-challenging endeavour, therewith complementing the electoral-representative system. The challenge then is to establish counter-democracy in such a way that it becomes a source of sincere alternatives to the societal status quo.

Changing the status quo, on the basis of such counter-democracy with its attitudes of critical sovereignty, is challenging for two main reasons. First of all, such a watchdog attitude implies a distance from institutionalized/constituted politics (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 253). This requires one to challenge politicians who have a popular mandate *i.e.* who are elected by the sovereign people. This then limits the room politicians have to address the needs of the people, causing frustration. Also, a part of the people may regard future uncertainties concerning the societal status quo undesirable, as they are comfortable in their current status quo. The second reason relates to the diffusion of the traditional concept of sovereignty, as a result of which centres of political authority have become increasingly distant and dispersed. This process had initially provided room for the constitutive role of ‘the people’ in the first place, but has now made it difficult for citizens to imagine alternatives to the status quo. Citizens now face the challenge to grasp the increasingly complex political landscape (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 254) and therefore no longer feel like they can change their own societal status quo for the better.

As mentioned, Rosanvallon uses the term critical sovereignty to address an attitude of vigilance towards power, upon the basis of a right to resist. Initially, critical sovereignty was institutionalized when modern parties were formed since these could provide parliamentary opposition to the centralized execution of power (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 159). With the advent of worker’s movements, critique of the system started to come from outside the institutionalized realm of conflict, as workers were denied political representation. The right to resist would now often take the form of social protest, based upon a politics of transformative action. No longer was the political legitimacy of the government automatically accepted as social legitimacy. In testing a government’s social legitimacy, the opposition plays a positive *i.e.* constitutive role in democracy, challenging the existent status quo. It is therefore only with critical sovereignty, instead of negative sovereignty *i.e.* political cynism and protest voting, that conflict in democracies can become something productive, or even transformative.

According to Rosanvallon, attitudes of critical sovereignty also exist on the level of the individual. The rebel, as critical sovereignty, is the one who says no to the current state of affairs, no to the status quo. Quoting Albert Camus (1951), Rosanvallon states that the rebel is “a man who says no,” but a “no” of intervention rather than renunciation (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 160). Though they do so in an affirmative manner regarding a desired alternative. This desired alternative is presented in a universalizable manner, appealing e.g. to standards of

justice. Critical sovereignty can then become sovereignty in itself, by replacing the pre-existent status quo with the desired, imagined future. Such a future may already prefigure in their politics of action *i.e.* their actions represent what future society should be like. Rebels are both the productive and the mobilizing force of the transformation towards a society that falls in line with universalizable standards of (social) justice (at least in the eyes of the rebels themselves) that supersede the current status quo.

Rebellion is therefore different from other forms of social and political protest, such as activism and civil disobedience. Activism seeks to play a constraining, or preventive role towards actors involved in a certain aspect of the status quo (Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 63-64). Their aim is not the transformation of the status quo, but to challenge the rationale behind a part of it they deem unjust. Activists subsequently pressure decision-makers to enforce changes regarding these aspects. Rebels on the other hand envision to transform such aspects of the status quo themselves, to make society as a whole fall in line with standards of justice (as perceived by the rebels themselves). Civil disobedience meanwhile is a form of negative politics, where people aim to form “a counter friction to stop the machine” (Thoreau 1849, cited in Rosanvallon 2008 [2006], 163) since they believe the institutionalized powers will never fall in line with the eternal values of truth and justice. Although both civil disobedience and rebellion imply one to take a distance from the societal status quo as an act of critical sovereignty, for the sake of standards of true justice, we would argue that rebellion combines this with the aim for positive and transformative politics towards a more just status quo. Civil disobedience may therefore very well serve as a precursor for full-fledged rebellion.

As mentioned, a different perspective upon the tension between constitutive and constituted politics has been developed by Lefort. The constitutive nature of conflict for him is taken up in a distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’, rather than ‘democracy’ and ‘counter-democracy’. For Lefort, ‘politics’ refers to the institutionalized realm of conflict. Such an institutionalization of conflict is characteristic of democracies. The sphere of ‘the political’ meanwhile is the symbolic order that precedes the empirical order of the institutionalized society (Lefort 2016a [1983]). The institutionalization of ‘politics’, next to other spheres *i.e.* the dispersion of society into different spheres, is in itself already something political. The distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ can e.g. be an externalization of *laissez-faire* market liberalism. However, this institutionalization of society can be challenged from the symbolic sphere of ‘the political’. From this pre-institutional, symbolic sphere of politics, alternatives to the status quo can be envisioned. Democracies are therefore characterized by indeterminacy. Illustratively, for democracy and thus this self-transformative and simultaneously indeterminate aspect of societies to become perceived as legitimate, the institutionalized symbolics surrounding power had to change. It was necessary that power was no longer legitimized by reference to a God-given mandate, but that the place of power (*lieu du pouvoir*) symbolically became an empty place (*lieu vide*) (Lefort 2016b [1981]). No-one can plausibly occupy the entire seat of power. This power is always challenged by the non-selfidentical ‘people’ within a democracy, which does not self-align to let itself be represented as ‘one’. The social legitimacy of politically legitimate power then still has to be developed. It is then in this pre-institutionalized, symbolic sphere, that the constitutive and invigorating

element of politics in the strong sense of the word, *le politique*, resides. The latter then is opposed to *la politique*, which Lefort describes as society's empirically visible *institutionalized* aspects.

This has interesting consequences for Rosanvallon's theory of the rebel as critical sovereignty. Since Rosanvallon also attributes critical sovereignty to e.g. political parties, and the rebel is an individual/singular manifestation of such critical sovereignty, a politician could very well simultaneously be a rebel, despite being part of the institutionalized, political status quo. For Lefort meanwhile, although politics constitutes an institutionalized sphere of conflict, it does not point beyond itself exactly for its institutionalized nature. As a result, any act of rebellion should, theoretically, originate from the sphere of 'the political', to challenge the institutionalized status quo. Consequently, it becomes implausible for politicians to be rebels according to Lefort's theory, since they are part of a distinct sphere of institutionalized politics. This institutionalized sphere finds its legitimacy in social processes that take place within 'the political', which does point beyond itself as a symbolic order and enables one to question and formulate alternatives to the existent status quo *i.e.* the empirical order of the society of which 'politics' is a part.

The President; a Rebel?

During our research in Bratislava, it occurred to us that many identified the current president, Zuzana Čaputová as a rebel. This view was also held by both by Radovan Geist, editor of the Euractiv Slovakia portal, and Ol'ga Gyárfášová, who works as a Senior Research Fellow of the Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava. The latter classified her, in an interview with *Foreign Policy Magazine*, as someone with an "ethos of a civil rights leader, who successfully fought against powerful political and economic interest groups." (Kalan 2019). Both Geist and Gyárfášová were interviewed as part of our research project. It is an interesting fact that a politician is identified as a rebel, since according to Lefort's theory, politicians reside within the institutionalized sphere of politics. As a result, they can theoretically not be rebels, since acts of rebellion rely upon the symbolic, pre-institutionalized sphere of *the political i.e.* politics in the strong sense. For Rosanvallon meanwhile, politicians can be rebels as long as they maintain an individual attitude of critical sovereignty. Although Čaputová in principle, did not do anything spectacular and indeed acts within the institutionalized sphere of politics to make an impact, she nonetheless classifies as a rebel. She felt obliged to run for presidency after the murder of Jan Kuciak, using "Let's face the evil together" as her campaign slogan (Djonovic 2020).

Currently, she challenges the status quo in Slovakia and brings a glimmer of hope for those people who want to see change for the better regarding corruption. As the country's first female president (BBC 2019), she battles corruption which, as we found out, acts as a rigid element of the Slovakian status quo. It is her attitude of critical sovereignty, for anti-corruption purposes within a notoriously corrupt political status quo, that makes her a rebel. Simply by being present in Slovakian politics, she expresses the wish for a transformation of the societal status quo, where corruption is no longer maintained on the basis of the disenchantment it brought upon

the citizens. With her party Progresívne Slovensko, which she founded in 2017, she furthermore strives for ecological protection and seeks to battle climate change. Illustratively, she was rated the most trusted politician in Slovakia by its citizens in both 2020 and 2021 (Kafkadesk 2020; Kafkadesk 2021).

Nonetheless, in her role as president, she inevitably remains part of the existent status quo by belonging to the institutionalized sphere of politics. She can impossibly say 'no' to this sphere entirely, which would theoretically constrain her potential rebelliousness, as Lefort's theory implied. Regardless of this fact, she does aim to transform Slovakia's status quo. In her actions as president, she exactly makes Slovak democracy accommodate the Lefortian ideal. The institutionalized sphere of politics increasingly becomes institutionalization of conflict. Her presence in the Slovak political system implies the presence of conflict, as her vision of the future status quo is irreconcilable with that of the corrupt segments of the political elite, which have so thoroughly characterized Slovakia's status quo in the past. Whether corruption in Slovakia will really become 'a thing of the past' is still to be seen, but exactly this may already constitute a signal of the blooming indeterminacy, characteristic of modern democracies.

Maintenance of a Dominant Status Quo

As mentioned, the status quo is a defining factor for the notion of a rebel. It is therefore interesting to have a closer look at the concept of a status quo, which is in and of itself hard to grasp. As discussed before, it consists of both institutionalized aspects such as laws and the organisation of the government, as well as informal, diffuse aspects such as social values, shared beliefs and traditions. It encompasses norms that change only very slowly over time.

Since hard-to-pin-down concepts like social values can vary between groups within one society, it is possible to imagine that several status quos can exist alongside each other simultaneously within the same society. Of course, institutionalized aspects, such as laws, tend to be more or less uniform within modern, centralized states, so some overlap between these status quos can still be expected. One could imagine that the weaker the authority of a government is, the more room there is for differentiating views and hence for the existence of multiple status quos. However, if a government imposes itself assertively on its society, certain groups of people can lose trust and turn away from it. This increases the visibility of the differences between the multiple status quos as experienced by the different social groups.

Several factors could form dividing lines between these status quos. Age, religion, political orientation, economic status and geographical location can have a large impact on the reality people experience and therefore can create separate status quos. These dividing lines do not necessarily delineate well-defined, separate groups, as some of these lines more or less intertwine and separate the society in the same manner. It can be argued that these differences are all part of the same, albeit differentiated, status quo. Our definition of a status quo, however, includes social values as an important indicator, which implies that when these values differ greatly, the status quos can be interpreted as truly separate entities.

Evidence collected in Bratislava suggests that these factors can lead to discernible differences between people. Generally, a large gap in mentality was observed between the generations that have memories of live in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, which existed until 1990, and those that have not. The former group was often more satisfied with the current state of affairs in Slovakia, while the latter group tended to be more frustrated with the political climate. Of course, the distinction between these groups is not absolute, but on the whole, nonetheless, very noticeable. Aside from the generational gap, geographic location seemed to further influence the social values of citizens. People often referred to a gap in perception between the western and eastern parts of Slovakia, or, more specifically, between urban and more rural areas. This gap often went hand-in-hand with differences in trust in politics and support for the government. Our findings seem to imply that people within Bratislava experience a lot more frustration about the current state of affairs.

In a society with a multiplicity of status quos, not all of them are equally dominant. Some of them can dictate the political reality, while others have little to no say in the direction of society as a whole. It happens frequently that a certain status quo dominates the government, determining the laws and direction of the country. This viewpoint is parallel to the concept of a *hegemony* as introduced by Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014) and Chantal Mouffe (1943-). A hegemony is the result of the belief that in a society, not all groups have an equal amount of power (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The hegemony then is the group of people and their set of beliefs that determine the political and social landscape. In later works, Mouffe develops these ideas into that of a *agonistic democracy* (Mouffe 1999). As long as there is hegemony, there will also be antagonism. This is the result of always present differences within a society, in which people or groups of people will be adversarial to the current hegemony. Crucial is whether the hegemony accepts these differentiating and critical views as legitimate adversaries, in which case they are agonistic, or if it allows no room for these views to develop. In the latter case, the adversaries are seen as true enemies by the hegemony, and are called antagonistic. Agonisms are allowed the room to develop themselves, stabilizing in so-called *hegemonic projects*. These can greatly influence the hegemony, although Mouffe argues that it does not always result in a mere change of opinion. A change within a hegemony is a big event, fundamentally shifting the status of this hegemony. The result can be seen as a change in hegemony itself. As Mouffe states: "To come to accept the position of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity, it has more of a quality of a conversion than of rational persuasion" (Mouffe 1999, 755).

Mouffe's ideas can be used to substantiate the view that several status quos can exist within one society. In this case, the dominant status quo functions as Mouffe's hegemony, while the other status quos can be seen as agonistic or even antagonistic to this hegemony. The status quos that are not dominant can, if they are allowed the space, develop hegemonic projects that form alternatives to the dominant status quo, possibly initiating change within the dominant status quo, thus a change of hegemony.

A dominant status quo can consist of (generally) unwanted though rigid habits, which is apparent in our example of Slovakia. As mentioned, the country suffers from widespread

corruption. After the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, who uncovered stories on corruption related to the government, massive protests broke out. These protests aimed to fundamentally change the dominant status quo, getting rid of corrupt elements. However, a few years later, we can conclude that the system more or less survived and retained itself. With this in mind, it would be interesting to see how a dominant status quo can remain dominant over time.

The status quo that controls the government, often by default also dominates institutions such as education. Through socialization it is able to enforce its norms and values on the youngest generation of citizens, creating familiarity with and acceptance of the status quo at a young age. This opens up the opportunity for the status quo to not only remain dominant in the governmental sphere but further to remain the dominant status quo within the entirety of the society. This effect does not always need to occur due to malicious intent. Since the curriculum is usually a reflection of the norms and values of those who decide on it, and the people who decide on it are often part of the dominant status quo, there will be some instalment of the ideas of this status quo within students. A sustainable curriculum reflects this realization, by trying to let students come into contact with a variety of views and additionally train them to think critically for themselves. In the absence of these elements, the predominant status quo has an easier time surviving.

It goes without saying that politicians can play a crucial role in maintaining a dominant status quo. First and foremost, they are often directly in charge of creating the more tangible parts of the status quos, like laws. At the same time, politicians are also crucial in setting the more general course of society and representing norms and values that are thought of as important for said society. This creates a powerful position for politicians. In some democracies, this position is used to create political narratives that sometimes even instil fear of change in people. Turning the politician's position into one as a protector of their status quo, aiming to maintain or even increase its hegemony. It comes as no surprise that this often results in the marginalization of people within these other status quos. This can result in stereotyping, which makes it even harder to change the perception of these groups, thus creating an antagonistic relation, instead of an agonistic one.

A status quo that dominates the government can have a significant effect on other status quos, often aiming to hinder them in order to increase the likelihood of its own survival at the expense of others. If the values of the dominating status quo are enforced on society as a whole, this can certainly lead to clashes with groups of people that have different values, creating tension between the various status quos. This tension can create a struggle within society, in which varying opposing views compete to increased dominance. However, it can reach a point where a dominant status quo is normalized to such an extent that it goes unnoticed for most, so that competing it becomes close to impossible. In this case, people might give up on the system and separate themselves at least partly from the rest of society, creating an even bigger cleavage between their status quo and the dominant one. This effect of ousting other status quos from the system greatly benefits the prevailing status quo in its quest to survive. A very clear example of this is the concept of a brain drain based on political frustration. In this case, a

group of people grow so frustrated and hopeless with the system that runs their society that they choose to leave said society and try their luck elsewhere, effectively giving up the struggle with the ruling status quo. What remains is a country in which the dominant status quo faces even fewer challengers.

In Bratislava, brain drain was often cited as an important obstacle to changing the current political climate. A sizeable part of the population, often members of the younger generations, has grown frustrated with the governmental and economic situation to such an extent that they decide to leave the country altogether. A significant number of the respondents in the street interviews younger than forty signalled that they at the very least considered leaving. Others indicated their beliefs that this brain drain severely hampers the fight for change, and strengthens the position of the current dominant status quo. It certainly is a real possibility that the brain drain has ensured the survival of the current hegemony in Slovakia for the foreseeable future.

Rebellion: saying “no” to the status quo and yes to oneself

Having discussed who rebels are and what their relation to one or more status quos is, as well as their position regarding institutionalized politics, a question appeared before our eyes: how exactly does one become a rebel? When and how an individual, or group of individuals, can appear to think and act so as to enact a rebellion? While an individual's biography and personality may explain a lot, an act of rebellion - as a *political* phenomenon - goes beyond individuals and their motivations, thus requiring structural explanations as well. The question at hand, then, is *not* about the psychology of a rebel but rather a reflection on the possibilities and “(...) the conditions for a political and existential rupture (...)” (Lazzarato, 2014), especially in times when the conviction that “what currently exists must necessarily exist” reigns *i.e.* a heteronomous self-institution of society (Castoriadis 1987 [1975], 102), shrinking political imagination and hope (Bookchin, 1992).

Personal characteristics aside, the ability of so-called critical thinking, or “thinking independently,” is often linked to the possibility of rebellion, both within and outside of academia. While interviewing academics, specialists and laypeople, we have encountered various opinions on what constitutes a rebellion and whether it is needed and/or possible in contemporary Slovakia. Albeit various answers and examples were given, one common thread ran throughout all the interviews: the ability (or lack thereof) to think critically. Critical thinking was nearly unanimously connected to the possibilities of political rebellion or, at least, a significant sociopolitical change. In fact, the notion of critical thinking turned out to be a meeting point where the Slovakian past impacts its present and future. For, the lack of critical thinking, so often mentioned by Slovaks on the street, was often tied to its past ‘behind the Iron Curtain’, or, going even further back, to its tumultuous history with Hungary and Czechia. The so-called “Soviet mentality” was often brought up to explain apathy and inability or unwillingness to analyse reality critically. This Soviet-era inheritance was often blamed, by

people on the streets, for the popularity of fake news, the rise of populism, and the easiness with which Slovak politicians were said to manipulate people.

Thus, rebels are thought to be the one who “begins to think for himself”, thinks independently. As mentioned above, Rosavallon follows Camus in his definition of the rebel who says “no” to, what they perceive, as the unfair and untenable status quo. Interestingly, as Rosavallon likewise notes, Camus' rebel *also* says “yes” to one's agency, sense of self-legitimacy, judgment and values one decides to fight for (Camus, 1951). During our brief stay in Bratislava, we were lucky enough to meet and interview a person perfectly embodying Camus' rebel. Running the STOPA organisation, which works with homeless and underprivileged people in the capital, Pavel Sabel combines his attention and knowledge of conditions of poverty in Bratislava, with a holistic approach, at the intersection of homelessness and ecology. He recognized the absolute unbearableness of the growing economic inequalities and marginalization of particular groups of people and situated these phenomena in the larger context of aggressive capitalist transformations and the degradation of the natural environment. As a result, he and his coworkers set a system within which a space for growth and responsibility is created for underprivileged people, who, simultaneously work to make their city greener. Here, we see how “no” and “yes” work in tandem. When asked about what being a rebel means for him, he announced it is, among other things, saying “yes” to the values one holds dear; in that way, he proclaimed, “I feel free, I have integrity.”

The word “responsibility” is also of importance as Sabel ties it to freedom, to act in such a way that people can lead their lives and be accountable for themselves and the people and environment around them. His empowerment intertwines with the possibilities of responsibility and freedom he strives to create for others. Therefore, we have seen that when the reality in which a future rebel has emerged becomes insufferable (or, is finally recognized as such), an “awakening of conscience” is said to happen, and the rebel spontaneously “acts” (Camus, 1951). Even if these romantic notions of the rebel and epistemic liberation at times turned out to be close to the truth, as exemplified by Mr Sabel's actions, an important caveat is nonetheless to be noted.

That is, critical thinking is not the only prerequisite for rebellion. Not only is critical thinking not enough for one to rebel, but, as it turns out, the concept of critical thinking is far less unproblematic than one may expect. For, what does it mean to think independently? Independently from whom? What is the yardstick of judging whether a way of thinking is “critical”? Does critical thinking precede the rebellion, or *is it already* an act of rebellion itself? What conditions are necessary to nurture the skill of critical thinking among people? Finally, specifically crucial in the light of our research in Bratislava is the question, what does it mean to think critically in the world of many, simultaneously coexisting and intersecting status quos? As in recent years, the notion of critical thinking has been hijacked by the proponents of various conspiracy theories, these questions have to be posed.

Without pretending to be able to answer all of these questions, we instead choose to focus here on the assertion that critical thinking is but one of the necessary conditions for a political

rebellion. As mentioned above, while discussing the notion of critical sovereignty, one of the crucial political abilities that citizens can and should have is imagination, understood as a necessary part of *hope*, understood as a political practice.

Some political thinkers conceptualize hope not so much as a feeling but rather as a political *practice* that can be developed and nurtured communally. Hope is the grasp at the intersection of “reasoning and imagination,” (Meijer, 2022); in hope, the recognition of the unbearableness and awfulness of the status quo meshes with the conviction that a crack in the system *is* possible, even if highly unlikely. A rebel thus emerges from the paradoxical blend of hopelessness and hope and, much less paradoxical, the linking of reason with affective political practice and creativity. Even seemingly the most hopeless of rebellions, such as those of Jan Palach in Czechia, or Nizar Issaoui in Tunisia, are driven by a glimmer of hope that their desperate acts will ultimately bring about *some* lasting change. It could be said, therefore, that one of the conditions of a rebel activity is the ability and courage to critically envision an (im)possible future that goes “beyond the social and political present” (Meijer, 2022). In this light, critical thinking would mean not only a critical analysis of reality but also, or maybe especially, a creative allowance for the unknown as rebels must be prepared that their action will open spaces for thinking what in their times is yet unthinkable (Bloch, 1976). It is for this reason that Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) connected the faculty of the creative imagination to politics in the strong sense *i.e. le politique*, as also used by Lefort (Lefort 2016a [1983]): “However lucid, reflective, willed it may be, the instituting activity springs from the instituting imaginary, which is neither locatable nor formalizable. The most radical revolution one could conceive of would always take place within a history already given” (Castoriadis 1992 [1988], 293-94).

Concluding remarks

In May of this year, the Slovak millionaire, suspected of commissioning the murder of investigative journalist Ján Juciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, was surprisingly acquitted of the crime (Zeit 2023). An unsatisfactory closure to a violent crime that had rocked a nation, sparking mass protests and demands for a fundamental change in the prevailing societal status quo amongst the Slovak population. Based on the fate of Kuciak, someone who publicly challenged the prevailing ‘order’ of (governmental) corruption, the present article explored questions surrounding status quo(s), its reproduction and, consequently, the idea of a rebel, someone who sets out to precisely change such a status quo. For this purpose, the authors were able to refer to a research trip to the Slovak capital of Bratislava, where interviews with experts and passers-by were conducted. This allowed for a deeper insight into the socio-economic and political realities of the Eastern European country (albeit, of course, only a small sample) and enabled us to derive valuable information for our work.

First, the works of Rosanvallon (2008) and Lefort (2016a) were considered to critically address the extent to which politicians, who themselves are sometimes perceived as personifications of

a status quo, may themselves act as rebels against the prevalent status. Both philosophers' reasoning could not yield an unambiguous answer to this question. Nevertheless, according to Rosanvallon's reasoning, the classification of a rebel as a critical sovereign permits an existence as both a rebel and a politician. Such a conclusion is in line with the classification of two Slovakian dialogue partners, both of whom classified the incumbent President Čaputová, the first female to hold this office, as a rebel.

Reflecting upon the perceived prevalence of a dominant status quo in Slovakian society, observed by us and our participants, the question of how the status quo maintains and reproduces itself emerged. Thereby, education could be identified as a potential driver ensuring the permeance and stability of the current status quo. Participants in our interviews in Slovakia consistently referred to the crucial role of education in the continuation or potential transformation of the prevailing social reality. Along with the above, the interviewees highlighted another issue - the simultaneity of various status quos. In principle, a status quo can be regarded as *the* social and political reality. However, these socio-economic, and political realities may differ significantly. Therefore, in a society such as the Slovak one, different status quos may prevail depending on the socioeconomic, ethnic and religious (to mention only a few influencing factors) individual conditions.

But what makes a person like Kuciak a rebel? What circumstances should be present and what conditions should be fulfilled for this? For many, 'rebellion' is associated with the concept of critical thinking. However, we argued that this is an abridgement and oversimplification. Certainly, critical thinking matters, yet it is also true that the reality in which the potential rebel finds themselves also matters. Should the experienced reality be regarded as insufferable by the individual, an awakening of conscience may occur eventually turning them into a rebel. Thereby, the rebel arises from the tension between hope and hopelessness - hope for a new status quo and hopelessness for the current one. Endowed with this combination and the ability and courage to envisage another (im)possible future under a new status quo, one completes one's transformation into a rebel in order to transform the status quo.

The considerations presented in this paper concerning the notion of the rebel and the status quo are merely a sketch of the questions and tensions inherent in them. Nevertheless, this fact does not detract from the analysis. In times that many perceive as turbulent, in which women in Iran are feeling compelled to march for their rights, in which democracies in Europe and North America are threatening to further erode, and in which war has once again invaded Europe, questions around the status quo and rebels remain of importance.

Literature

BBC News (2018, 15th of March) Slovakia journalist: Prime Minister Fico replaced amid Scandal. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of March 2023]:
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43414207>.

- BBC News (2019, 31st of March) Zuzana Caputova becomes Slovakia's First Female President. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of May 2023]: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47756368>.
- Bloch, E. & Ritter, M. (1976). Dialectics and Hope. *New German Critique*, 9: 3–10.
- Bodin, J. (1992) *On Sovereignty* [transl. and ed. Franklin, J.H., orig. publ. 1576 in *Six livres de la République*]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bookchin, M., Bookchin, D. & Taylor, B. (2015) *The next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*. Brooklyn, Ny: Verso.
- Camus, A. (1973) *The Rebel* [orig. publ. 1951: *L'Homme Révolté*]. London: Penguin Books in Association With Hamish Hamilton.
- Castoriadis, C. (1987) *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (transl. and ed. Blamey, K.) [orig. publ. 1975: *L'institution imaginaire de la société*]. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Castoriadis, C. (1992) Power, Politics, Autonomy [orig. publ. 1988: *Pouvoir, Politique, Autonomie* in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 93], in Honneth, A., McCarthy, T., Offe, C. & Wellmer, A. (Eds.) *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992.
- Crampton, R.J. (1997) *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century - and After*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Djonovic, A. (2022) A Progressive Profile: Slovak President Zuzana Caputova. CEE Legal Matters. Accessible via [retrieved 5th of June 2023]: <https://ceelegalmatters.com/law-firms/3000-majernik-mihalikova/14215-a-progressive-profile-slovak-president-zuzana-caputova>.
- Hlatky, R. (2023) Nations in Transit 2023: Slovakia. *FreedomHouse*. Accessible via [retrieved 5th of June 2023]: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovakia/nations-transit/2023>.
- iROZHLAS. (2018, 17 september). Prokuratura: Jána Kuciaka zavraždili kvôli práci. Hľadáme muža, ktorý by mohol mať informácie. IROZHLAS. Accessible via [retrieved 9th of June 2023]: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/identikit-vrazda-na-objednavku-jan-kuciak_1809171354_lac.
- Kafkadesk (2020) President Zuzana Caputova most trusted Politician in Slovakia. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of May 2023]: <https://kafkadesk.org/2020/04/22/president-zuzana-caputova-most-trusted-politician-in-slovakia/>.
- Kafkadesk (2021) President Caputova most trusted Politician in Slovakia, Poll shows. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of May 2023]: <https://kafkadesk.org/2021/04/21/president-caputova-most-trusted-politician-in-slovakia-poll-shows/>.
- Kalan, D. (2019) Can Zuzana Caputova Save Slovakia? *Foreign Policy Magazine*. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of May 2023] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/28/can-zuzana-caputova-save-slovakia-smer-kocner-kuciak-sefcovic/>.

- Kubániová, E. (2018, 26 april). Man of the revolution. VSQUARE. Accessible via [retrieved 9th of June 2023]: <https://vsquare.org/jan-kuciak-man-of-the-revolution/>.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Lazzarato, M. & Jordan, J.D. (2014) *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Los Angeles, Ca: Semiotext(e).
- Lefort (2016a) Het vraagstuk van de democratie [orig. publ. 1983: La question de la démocratie, in (1986) *Essais sur le politique (XIXe-XXe Siècles)*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil] in *Wat is Politiek?* (transl. ed. Van de Wiel, P. & Verheijen, B.) Amsterdam: Boom Klassiek.
- Lefort (2016b) Bestaat het theologisch-politieke nog? [orig. publ. 1981: Permanence du théologico-politique? in (1986) *Essais sur le politique (XIXe-XXe Siècles)*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil] in *Wat is Politiek?* (transl. ed. Van de Wiel, P. & Verheijen, B.) Amsterdam: Boom Klassiek.
- Lipset, S.M. (1959) Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review* 53(1): 69–105.
- Meijer, E. (2022) Learning Hope in the Anthropocene: The Party for the Animals and Hope as a Political Practice. *Animal Studies Journal* 11(1): 145-172.
- Moreno, A. (2003) *Corruption and Democracy: A Cultural Assessment*, in Inglehart, R. (ed.) *Human Values and Social Change: Findings from the Values Surveys*. Leyden and Boston: Brill.
- Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? *Social Research* 66(3): 745–758.
- Przeworski, A. & Limongi, F. (1993) Political Regimes and Economic Growth. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7(3): 51–69.
- Przeworski, A. (1999) *Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2008) *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (transl. and ed. Goldhammer, A.) [orig. publ. 2006: *La Contre-Démocratie. La Politique à l'Âge de la Défiance*]. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- The Slovak Spectator (2018a, 2nd of March) Bratislava is the Capital of Press Freedom today. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of May 2023]: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20772206/deloire-bratislava-is-today-the-capital-of-press-freedom.html>.
- The Slovak Spectator (2018b, 17th of March) Enough of SMER, People chanted in Streets. Accessible via [retrieved 27th of May 2023]: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20782425/enough-of-smer-people-chanted-in-streets.html>.
- Thoreau, H.D. (2017) *Civil disobedience* [orig publ. 1849]. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press.

Zeit (2023, May 19) *Slowakisches Gericht spricht Unternehmer nach Journalistenmord frei*.
Zeit Online. Accessible via [retrieved 4th of July 2023]:
<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2023-05/slowakei-kocner-freispruch-journalistenmord-kuciak>