Capstone Thesis:

Nostalgia as Political Strategy: Robert Fico's Use of Communist-Era Memories and Social Media in Post-Communist Slovakia

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico strategically uses nostalgia for the communist era to shape national identity and political discourse in post-communist Slovakia. Drawing on theories of restorative nostalgia by Boym and post-peasant memory by Buzalka the study argues that nostalgia functions not merely as emotion but as a political tool, especially when amplified through social media.

The analysis is structured in three parts: first, a theoretical overview of nostalgia's role in populist communication; second, a historical comparison of Fico's rhetoric with propaganda from the 1950s and 1968; and third, an analysis through charts, of Fico's Facebook posts from 2023 to 2025. These posts show how digital platforms enable emotionally charged narratives that bypass traditional media and resonate with audiences longing for stability, dignity, and national sovereignty.

The findings suggest that Fico reactivates selective historical memory, not to restore socialism, but to legitimize his political authority and discredit liberal opponents. In doing so, he transforms nostalgia into a performance of identity and power, reinforcing populist discourse in Slovakia's fragile post-communist democracy.

Introduction

Nostalgia is defined as a sentimental longing for an individual's past. The feeling of nostalgia is profoundly social and relatively more positive than negative (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018). Nevertheless nostalgia is not merely a personal emotion but a powerful political instrument that shapes collective memory, national identity, and public discourse. Multiple academic articles perceive nostalgia as an emotional yearning for the past, often mistakenly equating it with melancholia. However while melancholia is a deeply personal and introspective emotion, nostalgia is inherently social, connecting individuals to a collective past(Boym,2001).

Even though often connected to individual psychological emotions, in this thesis I will argue that nostalgia functions as a political tool, specifically within the current political situation in Slovakia. This perspective aligns with Davis's argument that nostalgia is not merely a personal feeling but is socially and politically constructed. Consequently, rather than being solely an individual's sentimental longing, nostalgia actively shapes collective memory and influences public discourse, making it a significant instrument in the political sphere. Politicians who employ nostalgia present the past as the only truth and the most legitimate way to navigate the present(Davis,1979).

In political contexts, nostalgia is frequently instrumentalized as a rhetorical strategy, particularly by populist leaders who evoke an idealized past to justify policy directions, critique modernity, or consolidate power(Huyssen, 2005). In this regard, populism plays a crucial role, as it is often the key instrument through which nostalgia is effectively mobilized in political discourse.

According to Cass Mude, populism is viewed not merely as fundamental to politics but as a potentially emancipatory force that can challenge liberal democracy and foster a radical democracy by reintroducing conflict and mobilizing marginalized groups to alter the existing power structures. In the other words populism could be defined as a political strategy of a leader who seeks to govern based on the direct support of their voters and followers. The approach of populism emphasizes that it seeks a strong and charismatic leader who can control the power of masses of people. However, populism is also specific in the context of geographical areas. For instance, populism in Europe is focused on anti-migration politics; rather, populism in Latin America is focused on the economic mismanagement of current governments(Mude,2017).

While populist leaders across the political spectrum can utilize nostalgia, it is particularly prevalent in countries with post-totalitarian histories(Kenny,2017). Nations that have transitioned from undemocratic regimes to democracies often struggle with the complexities of this transformation. In Eastern Europe, nostalgia and populism have been deeply intertwined since the communist era and continue to shape political narratives in today's democratic states(Nadkarni and Shevchenko,2014). The key difference between past and present uses of nostalgia lies in the medium through which it is disseminated. In the 20th century, nostalgia was primarily a propagandistic tool found in newspapers and political speeches. In contrast, I will

examine how nostalgia operates in the digital space, specifically on social media, where populist and authoritarian politicians leverage technology, including AI, to spread nostalgic rhetoric.

Social media plays a critical role in the spread of populist and nostalgic rhetoric. Unlike traditional media, which may impose editorial standards or fact-checking, platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow politicians to communicate directly with their audiences. This unfiltered communication enables figures like Robert Fico to disseminate emotionally charged messages, often without opposition or scrutiny from journalists. By bypassing institutional gatekeepers, social media amplifies the emotional and persuasive power of nostalgia, making it a particularly effective tool in the digital era. For this reason, this thesis focuses specifically on how nostalgia is used through social media, rather than in other political spaces(Gerbaudo,2018).

This study will focus on Robert Fico's social media strategies following his return as Slovakia's prime minister in 2023. Additionally, it will compare his nostalgic rhetoric with that of Viktor Orbán, drawing on the analysis by Szabó and Kiss (2020). How does Robert Fico use nostalgia for the communist era and Slovakia's historical alliance with the Soviet Union, especially Russia, on social media to shape national identity and political discourse in post-communist Slovakia? To answer this question, the following analysis will delve into Fico's social media posts from 2023, assessing their engagement, themes, and rhetorical strategies. This includes examining his videos and photos, which may reflect sentiments from Slovakia's past, and interactions with his followers on Facebook and Instagram to understand how audiences respond to nostalgic discourse.

In sum, this thesis argues that nostalgia is not merely a sentimental emotion but a powerful and strategic political tool. Specifically, I contend that Robert Fico uses restorative nostalgia to construct a compelling national narrative that resonates with Slovak voters. By drawing on post-communist memory, historical trauma, and a culturally embedded post-peasant worldview (Buzalka), Fico reinterprets the past to legitimize his populist message. This strategy is particularly effective in the digital sphere, where social media enables the performance and amplification of nostalgic rhetoric in response to contemporary crises, such as the war in Ukraine.

Methodologically, this analysis builds on the work of Szabó and Kiss, who researched nostalgia as a political tool in Hungary in 2019. However, their study was conducted before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, nostalgia-driven rhetoric has become more radicalized, making this study particularly relevant. To conduct this research effectively, I collaborated with the Slovak IT company Gerulata Technologies, which specializes in monitoring information wars on social media.

Using their tools, I analyzed content from the official Facebook page of Robert Fico, focusing on posts published between October 2023 and May 2025, with particular attention to the period following the assassination attempt in May 2024. While the primary time frame begins with this event, I also reviewed earlier posts to contextualize the evolution of his rhetoric. The key monitored terms included "Husák," "Šimečka", "Zelenskiy", "hrdosť"(pride), "Rusko"(Russia") which allowed for a targeted examination of how nostalgic and populist narratives were performed and received in the digital sphere.

This thesis will be structured into three main chapters. In chapter one I will provide a theoretical foundation by introducing key concepts such as political and collective nostalgia and their intersection with populism. This chapter will have multiple subsections: 1.1 Theoretical foundations of nostalgia 1.2 Implications for Slovakia and Róbert Fico, and 1.3 Nostalgia in digital political communication. The goal of this chapter is to establish the abstract theoretical framework essential for my analysis while clarifying the distinctions between these concepts. To do so, subsection 1.1, will engage with authors like Boym, whose distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is particularly relevant, with restorative nostalgia being the crucial focus of this thesis. Then this subsection will also discuss nostalgia as a philosophical concept through authors like Platón, Quill, and Havel. In the subsections 1.2 and 1.3 the second part of this chapter will examine the application of these concepts in the context of social media, drawing on the work of Szabó and Kiss.

In chapter two, I will look deeper into the rhetoric of populist communication used by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia and the key principles of its propaganda, with comparison to the rhetoric of Robert Fico. The section 2.1 will provide background on the regime and

analyze two instances of rhetoric from the communist era: first, the campaign of the early 1950s against the democratic leaders of the First Czechoslovak Republic, especially Tomáš G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš; and second, the regime's rhetoric in the period leading up to the Warsaw Pact invasion on August 21, 1968. While the 1968 newspaper texts, particularly from *Reportér*, are more direct propaganda than nostalgic rhetoric, they still reflect techniques of fear manipulation and enemy construction, which can be compared to Fico's discourse today, particularly in his positioning of the West and Ukraine as threats, despite Slovakia's EU and NATO membership.

In section 2.2, I will describe in more depth how this type of rhetoric functions on a psychological and ideological level. Drawing on Václav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, I will explore how ideology becomes internalized and reproduced by ordinary people, and how this mechanism remains relevant in the present. Havel's concept of the "post-totalitarian" system helps illuminate why certain rhetorical patterns, such as framing political dissent as a threat to national stability or casting opponents as enemies of the people—continue to resonate in post-communist societies. This section will help unpack how nostalgia-driven and populist rhetoric not only operates top-down but also relies on the participation and complicity of citizens who, knowingly or not, reproduce the system's logic.

The last chapter of this thesis presents a dedicated analysis of Robert Fico's Facebook posts from October 2023 to May 2025, following his return as Slovakia's Prime Minister. This time frame includes both the post-election period and his official return to work after the assassination attempt in May 2024, allowing for a detailed examination of how his nostalgic rhetoric evolved alongside key political events. The data was collected using monitoring tools provided by Gerulata Technologies, which track patterns in political communication on social media.

This chapter focuses specifically on posts that employ nostalgia as a populist tool, emphasizing themes such as stability, sovereignty, and anti-Western sentiment. It aims to understand how Fico mobilizes voter support and reinforces national identity through digital rhetoric. Special attention is given to how this communication strategy reflects Slovakia's geopolitical positioning and collective memory of the communist era, particularly in relation to

the war in Ukraine. Through this empirical study of his social media activity, the chapter highlights the strategic use of nostalgia in shaping public discourse in post-communist Slovakia.

Because this analysis of social media reveals the recurring presence of communist-era motifs and historical memory, chapter three will then describe the concept of post-communism and how these narratives are revived and recontextualized in contemporary political rhetoric. To shed light on this phenomenon, this analysis will engage with Svetlana Boym's conceptualization of post-communist nostalgia and Slovak anthropologist Juraj Buzalka's insights from *Post-Peasant Memories: Populist or Communist Nostalgia*(Buzalka,2018). Furthermore, the research will incorporate Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper's work on memory conflicts within post-communist Europe, a crucial lens for understanding how contested historical narratives mold identity and political discourse.

The methodology of this thesis is a political essay analyzing my main arguments based on readings combined with monitoring analysis based on data on social media through "Gerulata Technologies." Specifically, the first part will provide a theoretical analysis, examining the historical development of nostalgia, its role in political contexts, and related concepts. The second part will focus on discourse analysis, utilizing data and newspaper discourse to draw comparisons between past and present uses of nostalgia in political rhetoric.

This thesis tries to acknowledge all the potential biases in this analysis due to my position as a Slovak citizen. However, the thesis focuses on factual statements and social media posts, made by Robert Fico. Social media is important in this process because it lets politicians like Fico avoid traditional media and speak directly to their supporters. It also allows them to quickly spread emotional messages and, at times, misleading information. This direct and personal style of communication makes nostalgic ideas more powerful and helps create a version of reality shaped by selective memories of the past(Koc-Michalska et.al, 2016).

By exploring how nostalgia, populism, and social media work together, this thesis shows how online platforms are changing political communication and national identity in post-communist countries. The findings aim to contribute to broader discussions about how digital tools shape political narratives and influence public opinion. It aims to critically analyze

the role of populism and nostalgia in Eastern Europe,. The findings of this thesis will provide insights into the evolving relationship between nostalgia, social media, and political strategy, with implications extending beyond Slovakia to broader discussions on populism and digital democracy.

Chapter 1: The Politics of Nostalgia – Rhetoric, Populism, and Digital Memory:
1.1 Theoretical foundations of nostalgia

The word nostalgia itself has Greek roots and references men returning(Boym,2001). Besides the famous Odyssey by Homer, where Homer references feelings of nostalgia, Plato, one of the most prominent philosophers of all time, discusses emotional attachments to the past. Plato discusses this in chapters three and four of his timeless masterpiece, The Republic. He describes this phenomenon as anamnesis, the idea that actual knowledge is a remembrance of eternal truths rather than a longing for a glorified past. However, today, this feeling is also described as nostalgia. Plato warns against false myths that evoke longing for a past golden age, as these can distort political reality. Plato also expresses concerns about the dangers of poetry and music in shaping collective memory. He argues that certain art forms must be censored because they stir excessive emotions, potentially undermining rational governance. His thoughts on collective memory are thought-provoking but undemocratic in today's context. In other words, he anticipates that this feeling of restorative memory and idealizing the past can be abused to govern and manipulate voters. Plato is especially critical of nostalgia in political rhetoric. For instance, he criticizes Homer's epics for portraying heroes as driven by grief and longing, fearing that such depictions could weaken the moral fabric of the state. After Plato's critique of nostalgia in The Republic, later thinkers continued to grapple with its role in politics and society. During the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau explored the emotional power of memory, particularly in his reflections on exile and belonging(Plato,1998). In the 19th century, the Romantic movement further reshaped nostalgia, portraying it as a source of cultural identity and a potential obstacle to progress(Quill,2024). However, I will not delve into Rousseau's perspective on nostalgia, as nostalgia in the Enlightenment focused on individual and cultural identity during colonization.

The specific term "nostalgia" was established much later, in Switzerland in the 17th century. Originating as a medical term, nostalgia was once considered a curable illness. However, nowadays, it is clear that this is neither an illness nor a major individual "disease."

Continuing this argument, Boym highlights a vast difference between melancholia and nostalgia. Firstly, according to Boym, nostalgia does not automatically have to be a retrospective feeling of the mind. Often, nostalgia focuses more on present concerns or worries about the future, using past fantasies to help individuals accept or fulfill the needs of the present. Another key difference is that while melancholia is an individual feeling in consciousness, nostalgia is an emotion that connects an individual to a group of people, a nation, or a community, thereby creating a collective memory. Boym highlights with this definition the importance of collective memory and later nostalgia. According to Boym, collective nostalgia primarily re-creates collective memory and becomes a valuable tool for politicians to idealize the past and ignore real issues. Collective memory can often produce collective nostalgia, particularly in cases like war or totalitarian regimes. Since the French Revolution, nostalgia has often been invoked in political theory, particularly within conservative or traditionalist thought, to express longing for pre-revolutionary order and stability. (Lammers,2023).

This nostalgia transcends individual experiences to evoke a shared sense of loss among its people. For instance, Svetlana Boym's analysis of Yugonostalgia defines it as a form of collective memory reflecting a longing for Yugoslavia's lost state. Boym contrasts this collective nostalgia with individual nostalgia, highlighting that while the latter focuses on personal longing, the former is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of a nation or community. Boym argues that while individual nostalgia can also be used as a political tool, it is the sensitivity of collective nostalgia that holds significant power for politicians, as it taps into the shared emotions and memories of a group, enabling leaders to manipulate national identity and unify people under the shared idealized vision of the past.(Boym,2001).

Nevertheless, Boym´s most famous and intriguing thought regarding nostalgia is its division into two types. Boym introduced reflective and restorative nostalgia. According to Boym, its central pillar is the Greek word "nostos," meaning "returning home." To continue this argument with reflective nostalgia, Boym uses the Greek word "algia," which means sorrow and pain. In other words, reflective nostalgia describes a memory that reflects grief or pain. According to Boym, reflective nostalgia does not seek to restore a lost past but instead looks at it from a critical or ironic perspective. It is merely a longing for homecoming or returning to a situation that an individual has processed. This type of nostalgia is not bound to a single timeline and can exist across multiple time zones.

Even though this is not the form of nostalgia I want to focus on to support my argument, I will use an example to illustrate this abstract concept. The Czech writer Milan Kundera, whose books were banned during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, provides a fitting example. Kundera begins with a philosophical reflection on nostalgia in his novel Ignorance, which sarcastically and absurdly maps the journey of two people who emigrated from Czechoslovakia and returned after the Velvet Revolution. He explicitly describes reflective nostalgia as the suffering caused by an unfulfilled longing to return, whether to a place, a time, or a lost feeling. Kundera highlights that nostalgia is not just about physical distance but also about the unknown, the gaps in memory that make the past feel unreachable. It is more than homesickness; it is a yearning for something that may no longer exist as we remember it. This longing can shape collective identity, as people idealize the past to make sense of the present(Kundera, 2000).

In this thesis, I focus on the second type of nostalgia identified by Svetlana Boym: restorative nostalgia, which is essential to my argument. Restorative nostalgia is not just about remembering the past but about attempting to bring it back as an absolute truth. Just as heroes in Greek myths longed to return home, politicians use this form of nostalgia to revive traditions and past events as if they were the only valid reality(Dimitriadou and Maciejovsky,2019). According to philosopher and former president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, restorative nostalgia can be used by leaders in authoritarian regimes who try to idealize the past, to gain full control over people. Havel argues that people living under such regimes may develop a longing for a past that never truly existed, a past reconstructed by propaganda to maintain power(Václav Havel,1979). This aligns with Svetlana Boym's argument , where nostalgia is used as a political tool to reinforce a singular, authoritative version of history.

The key difference between reflective and restorative nostalgia is that while the first one allows us to look at the past without necessarily seeking to recreate it, restorative nostalgia does the opposite. It actively strives to restore the past to shape the present. Another perspective Boym presents is that restorative nostalgia attempts to recreate the past through specific historical objects or stories. Boym also highlights a central paradox of restorative nostalgia: the more intensive the rhetoric about the past becomes, the more selectively it is presented, often by populist politicians. The stronger the emphasis on historical continuity and traditional values,

the more distorted and idealized the past appears. A clear example of this selective past reconstruction is Viktor Orbán wearing a scarf depicting the historical Hungarian Kingdom, including present-day Slovakia, at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar(BBC,2022). This act sparked international controversy, demonstrating how political figures use carefully curated visions of the past to serve contemporary agendas.

1.2 Implications for Hungary and Slovakia

In this section, I will examine the research conducted by Szabó and Kiss, who carried out an essential study in Hungary. Their research explored how nostalgia was used as a tool by populist politicians during the 2019 EU Parliament election campaign. Explaining their findings is crucial to reinforcing my argument in this thesis. Szabó and Kiss' study serves as a key inspiration for this thesis, where I conduct a similar analysis in the context of Slovak politics.

In my analysis, I will primarily focus on Robert Fico, specifically examining his use of nostalgia in social media posts and how these posts interact with and influence his voters. Even though nostalgic narratives in Hungarian politics differ from those in Slovakia, the fact of the shared post-communist history and similar political developments in both countries make this study highly relevant to my argument.

Research by Szabo and Kiss on reflective communication and nostalgia during elections to the EU Parliament in 2019 brought interesting thoughts and conclusions about nostalgia as a political tool online. According to Szabo and Kiss, Hungarian nostalgia is reflected by far-right political parties that invoke sensitive historical eras, bringing voters positive memories of those times. These political parties even used nostalgia to evoke Great Hungary during the Hungarian Kingdom and later the Austria-Hungarian Kingdom. This brings people nostalgic ideas, even if they never lived in that era; positive statements by politicians can give Some people the feeling of missing something they never had. This reflects a broader pattern of nostalgia as a political tool that selectively reconstructs the past to legitimize present political strategies. Nostalgia is often associated with right-wing populist rhetoric; scholars such as Cinpoe and Norocel argue that it is predominantly a far-right tool to reinforce an idealized, homogeneous past(Cinpoes and Norocel,2020). However, this perspective overlooks how nostalgia can also be strategically employed by left-leaning populist movements. The case of Slovakia, where Robert Fico's self-proclaimed social democratic party, SMER-SD, extensively utilizes nostalgia as a political tool, directly challenges this assumption.

This shift in SMER-SD's rhetoric can be attributed to its ideological transformation over the past decade, particularly in response to political crises such as the 2015 refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia´s war against Ukraine. Fico has discovered that nostalgia, particularly an idealized vision of Slovakia's past, is an effective strategy for voter mobilization.

By portraying Slovakia's past as a time of stability and sovereignty, he legitimizes nationalist and populist narratives, particularly among vulnerable groups, such as older citizens, who may associate past authoritarian rule with security rather than repression. His rhetoric intensified during the refugee crisis when he framed Slovakia as a historically homogeneous nation under threat from external influences. A Facebook post from September 21, 2015, exemplifies this strategy: "Slovakia has always been a peaceful and homogeneous country. We have never had terrorist attacks because we have never allowed mass migration like in the West. We must preserve our way of life and not allow Brussels to dictate whom we should accept"(Fico, 2015).

This example aligns with my central argument: Nostalgia is not solely a tool of right-wing populism but can also be adopted by left-leaning parties when it serves their political interests. The Hungarian case further reinforces this argument. Research by Szabo and Kiss contradicts Cinpoe and Norocel claim that nostalgia is exclusive to the far right, demonstrating that left-wing politicians in Hungary also invoke nostalgic themes, albeit differently. Their study found that while far-right parties in Hungary use nostalgia to evoke nationalist sentiments, such as longing for Greater Hungary, left-leaning politicians appeal to nostalgia by emphasizing the economic security and social welfare of the socialist past. However, Szabo and Kiss also make an important distinction regarding the effectiveness of nostalgia on social media.

This pattern is strikingly similar to SMER-SD's approach in Slovakia. A key example is SMER politician Ľuboš Blaha, a member of the European Parliament, who frequently posts nostalgic content glorifying past socialist regimes, including positive references to Russia, China, and Cuba(Ľuboš Blaha, 2018-). This illustrates how left-wing populism, much like its right-wing counterpart, can strategically use nostalgia to shape public perception and influence voter behavior. Thus, nostalgia is not bound to a single ideological spectrum but is a versatile political tool that can be adapted to different historical narratives and voter demographics.

Nostalgia is a very powerful tool; however, the effects of nostalgia can be more assertive on social media.

1.3 Nostalgia and political communication on social media

Social media has become the most profitable platform for populist politicians, surpassing live press conferences and traditional media communication. Social media are often used to spread their demagogic statements without restrictions, avoiding opposition or challenges from journalists. These politicians understand that social media is their most powerful tool, and their supporters are likely to agree uncritically with everything they say(Koc-Michalska et.al 2014).

Furthermore, for countries like Hungary, the use of social media, particularly Facebook, has significantly altered the landscape of political communication. With 69% of Hungarians between the ages of 16-74 participating in this social media network, Hungary's engagement rate surpasses the European Union's average of 54% and is the highest among neighboring states. Similarly, despite having fewer interactions with citizens on social media than Hungary, Slovakia still maintains an above- average rate of 59%, demonstrating the profound impact of social media on political communication across the EU.

Now I will demonstrate the results and findings of research by Szabo and Kiss regarding nostalgia and political communication on social media in Hungary. The researcher's results are surprising and present two key findings. According to the authors, nostalgia is a complex mix of subjects, objects, and gestures. Interestingly, even academic papers examining nostalgia contradict the results of Szabo and Kiss(Frischlichet al.2023). Based on previous hypotheses, scholars predicted that populist politicians would use nostalgia widely. They assumed it would be a strong emotional tool, ultimately influencing voter behavior. However, Szabo and Kiss did not confirm this hypothesis. Their research suggests that nostalgic content on social media does not dominate political messaging to the extent expected. Instead, their findings reflect the emotional climate or general mood of voters, indicating that politicians may be responding to, rather than actively shaping, nostalgic sentiment. Another significant finding is how Hungarian politicians use nostalgia. They focus more on Hungary's past achievements than restoring that past in today's political landscape. This suggests that nostalgia in Hungary highlights historical successes rather than shaping current policies.

The most essential result concerns voter engagement. This finding adds nuance to my argument: While nostalgia is a powerful political tool, its impact depends very much on how and where it is used. Right-wing politicians using nostalgia on social media receive fewer emoji reactions and comments compared to left-wing politicians who post emotional content about the past. This can be explained by the fact that right-wing politicians often integrate nostalgia into their speeches in a subtle and almost implicit way. As a result, their voters perceive it as natural(Menke and Wulf, 2021). On the other hand, left-wing politicians use nostalgia less frequently. Because of this, when they do invoke the past, it sparks strong engagement and interaction on social media. However, this does not contradict the idea that nostalgia can be a powerful engagement tool. Its impact depends on how it is used, explicit nostalgic appeals tend to provoke stronger reactions, as seen with left-wing politicians who invoke nostalgia less frequently but in a more emotionally charged manner.

This subchapter tried to integrate Szabo and Kiss's research into my analysis. I demonstrate that nostalgia, while often associated with right-wing rhetoric, is a flexible political strategy that transcends ideological boundaries. This concept is crucial for understanding how nostalgia operates in political communication. In the next chapter, I will apply these insights to Slovakia, focusing on how Robert Fico and SMER-SD mobilize post-communist nostalgia, particularly on social media, to influence voter perceptions and reinforce their political strategy.

Chapter 2: Echoes of Communism: The Lingering Influence on Fico's Political Rhetoric

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the communist regime's rhetoric in Czechoslovakia serves not only as a historical example of propaganda but also as a crucial source of the nostalgic political language employed by Robert Fico today. The ideological tools and rhetorical patterns once used to discredit democratic leaders, manipulate historical memory, and foster anti-Western sentiment are being strategically revived in contemporary Slovakia. This chapter argues that nostalgia is not merely an emotional response but a politically instrumentalized tool. By examining the rhetoric of the Communist Party, particularly concerning events from 1951 and 1968, this thesis illuminates how Fico reuses and reframes this legacy to legitimize his authority and appeal to specific segments of the population.

I will analyze the nostalgic and "anti-Western" rhetoric employed by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia (1948-1989), focusing on events from 1951 and 1968. This historical instance of politically instrumentalized nostalgia in Slovak politics provides a crucial comparison point for understanding the contemporary discourse of Robert Fico, whose rhetoric similarly evokes the past in both national and international contexts. I will primarily examine two instances of rhetoric utilized by the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, rhetoric that bears a striking resemblance to Fico's current statements. The first is the rhetoric used in the 1950s to discredit political opponents, particularly the former government of the First Czechoslovak Republic. The second is the rhetoric surrounding the 1968 Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

The first subsection examines the Communist Party's rhetoric following their consolidation of power after 1948. Specifically, it focuses on the propaganda from 1951, which aimed to maintain and consolidate power by invoking nostalgia and attributing blame to previous regimes, particularly the government of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1939) and its key figures, President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Prime Minister Edvard Beneš, for concessions made to Hitler.

2.1 Discrediting the Nation's Enemies: From the Anti-Masaryk Campaign to Fico's Attacks on Šimečka

Although the Communist Party officially seized power in 1948, its efforts to undermine democracy had begun earlier, as it actively worked to disrupt and weaken opposition parties. Political scientist Edward Taborsky argues that 1948 constituted a coup d'état, an illegal seizure of power achieved through undemocratic means(Taborsky,2006).

In an article by Karel Hulička "The Communist Anti-Masaryk Propaganda in Czechoslovakia," Hulička analyzes a propagandistic book titled "Documents," published in 1951 by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Information. This state-controlled publication aimed to discredit Masaryk's legacy and promote a pro-Soviet interpretation of history.

T.G.Masaryk, also called "father Masaryk" was the first president of Czechoslovakia, after the First World War. Before the war Slovakia and Czech Republic were not independent and they were part of bigger monarchies(Austria-Hungary). However after losing the war, many nations wanted to separate, and Tomáš G.Masaryk, was co- founder of the idea to create a new state - Czechoslovakia. He and other diplomats founded this country based on western

democracies. Tomáš G. Masaryk sought to establish Czechoslovakia based on the democratic models of France and the USA. The Communist Party turned this legacy against him, labeling him "imperialistic" and bourgeois, and accusing him of associating with enemies. This strategy exemplifies typical populist nostalgic rhetoric, presenting a distorted and partial version of the past. Masaryk was blamed for the capitalist state, which purportedly led to its collapse under Prime Minister Beneš, where, according to "Documents," they allegedly surrendered Czechoslovakia to Hitler at the Munich Conference. However, it is a well-established historical fact that Czechoslovakia was not even invited to the Munich Conference, famously known as the conference "about us without us." Interestingly, the Communist Party had celebrated Masaryk just a few years prior, recognizing his contemporary popularity. However, having consolidated their power through a coup, the Communist Party felt emboldened to disseminate this hostile rhetoric, aiming to sway public opinion against the "capitalist traitor" and solidify their control over the new regime(Hulička,1957).

The regime deliberately fabricated and distorted accounts of Masaryk's activities. Hulička details how the correspondence between Masaryk and Beneš was manipulated to portray them as enemies of the state, accused of anti-socialist and pro-imperialist activities. These letters, written during the interwar period, were official and publicly accessible. Their reinterpretation was less about uncovering hidden truths and more about exploiting an unstable national identity. In a state composed of diverse ethnicities, including Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Roma, and Germans, it was easier to place blame on a symbolic establishment figure to explain social and political confusion(Thomas,2021)The regime strategically distorted historical context to construct a clear ideological enemy: capitalism. Masaryk and Beneš's references to allies such as France or the USA were entirely appropriate, given that the Czechoslovak Republic, founded in 1918, was modeled on French democratic ideals(Kirschbaum,2007). The Communist Party was fully aware of this historical legitimacy, yet it understood that even minor manipulation could serve as a powerful rhetorical tool. By weaponizing nostalgia for prewar instability and postwar trauma, such as Slovakia's separation and its fascist statehood, the regime created a sense of collective guilt. This guilt was then redirected toward Masaryk and Beneš, portrayed as the ones who had failed to prevent national disintegration.

At the core of this strategy lies an inversion of moral authority. Masaryk, once the embodiment of humanism, rational thought, and ethical politics, was rebranded as an obstacle

to progress. The regime followed a consistent rhetorical pattern: it attributed national traumas, such as the Munich Agreement or systemic inequality, to democratic predecessors, while presenting the Communist Party as the sole redeemer of a wounded nation. This approach was not merely propaganda; it was "identity engineering"(Horz,2023). The public was encouraged to replace feelings of respect, gratitude, and nostalgia for Masaryk with emotions of betrayal, shame, and mistrust. Such emotional reprogramming was central to the regime's effort to erase pluralistic memory and consolidate its claim to national legitimacy.

At the same time, the regime invoked a different kind of nostalgia, a longing for a strong, unified state that existed before the perceived disintegration brought by liberal democracy and Western influence. This form of restorative nostalgia, as defined by Svetlana Boym, sought not to critically reflect on the past but to reconstruct it as a source of national strength and moral clarity. By portraying the interwar democratic period as weak, fragmented, and responsible for national humiliation, the Communist Party positioned its own authoritarian vision as a return to stability, sovereignty, and social order. This idealized version of the past was crucial in legitimizing the regime's present authority and creating a sense of continuity with a selectively remembered national identity (Boym, 2001; Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2014).

This communist strategy, exemplified by the distorted narrative surrounding Masaryk, is crucial for understanding one aspect of Fico's nostalgic rhetoric, which is rooted in the communist regime. Fico, having been a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution, is familiar with this type of rhetoric(Benedikovičová,2014). As I will demonstrate, Fico employs a form of nostalgic communist rhetoric that involves discrediting and attempting to eliminate political adversaries. However, given that Slovakia is a democratic republic and Fico was democratically elected, he must exercise caution in applying this strategy. Currently, the opposition leader is Michal Šimečka, who represents Progressive Slovakia, a pro-European and pro-Ukrainian liberal party, in contrast to Fico's SMER-SD(Šimečka,2025).

Fico recognizes Šimečka as his primary opponent, and recent polls indicate that Progressive Slovakia is leading(Aktuality.sk,2025). Consequently, Fico is employing a strategy to delegitimize Šimečka, aiming to portray him as an enemy of the people. The parallels

between this and the anti-Masaryk campaign are striking: both involve manipulating public perception to discredit political adversaries by portraying them as threats to national stability.

The main similarity between the anti-Masaryk rhetoric of the Communist Party and Fico's anti-Šimečka rhetoric lies in how both figures were framed as traitors influenced or controlled by the West. In Masaryk's case, the communists accused him of being pro-imperialist and responsible for the collapse of the capitalist First Republic. With Šimečka, Fico's narrative centers on alleged corruption and personal gain, while still emphasizing foreign influence and betrayal. Specifically, Fico repeatedly accuses Šimečka of enriching himself and his family through public and EU grants, constructing a narrative of parasitism on the state. Fico also compares Šimečka to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, suggesting both symbolize systemic financial abuse under the guise of democratic values. He mocks Šimečka and invokes conspiracy theories about George Soros, and links Šimečka to an NGO named after his grandfather, a dissident philosopher who opposed the communist regime. Fico presents this NGO as a liberal tool controlled by Šimečka, contributing to the decision not to grant it state funding(Fico,2024).

In addition to attacking Šimečka's family, Fico has worked to undermine his political identity and public credibility. For example, when Šimečka and other opposition members expressed concern about a new law passed by Fico's government, Fico accused them of treason, portraying their appeal to the EU as a betrayal of Slovak national interests. He uses Šimečka's past role as vice-chair of the European Parliament to label him a traitor paid by Western money. This rhetorical strategy mirrors earlier attacks by Fico against former Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, whom he publicly called an "American spy" and a "CIA agent"(Haughton et.al,2025)

Thus, while the Communist Party's campaign against Masaryk was rooted in the trauma of the Munich Agreement and fears of Western betrayal, Fico's attacks on Šimečka construct a similar emotional logic. He presents Šimečka as a foreign-influenced liberal who threatens Slovak sovereignty and traditional values. Though not based on a singular historical trauma, Fico's rhetoric draws on a constructed sense of cultural and political loss, evoking nostalgia for an imagined era of national unity, self-sufficiency, and moral clarity. This nostalgic framework allows Fico to position himself as the protector of "real" Slovakia, in contrast to liberal elites accused of weakening the nation through foreign influence. Both cases illustrate how political

leaders use emotionally charged narratives to discredit opponents, reshape national identity, and appeal to voters through strategic disinformation and symbolic memory. In Fico's case, this approach resonates especially well on social media, where nostalgia can be rapidly mobilized to amplify populist messaging and delegitimize dissenting voices.

2.2 The 1968 Invasion and Contemporary Echoes in Fico's Rhetoric"

The second example of Fico's rhetoric can be seen in his response to international politics and the large-scale anti-government protests in February 2025 (Denník N, 2025). These demonstrations were organized in opposition to Fico's stance on Russia's war in Ukraine. He adopted Russian propaganda narratives, such as the false claim that "Ukraine was committing genocide against Russian people in the East of Ukraine," a statement widely refuted by political scientists and media sources (Weiss, 2025). Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in turn, closely parallels a crucial historical event in Czechoslovakia: the 1968 occupation by Warsaw Pact countries, led by the Soviet Union, which sought to "normalize" the country and reverse perceived Western influence (Kramer, 2009). This moment remains deeply rooted in the collective memory of both Slovakia and the Czech Republic and is frequently invoked in contemporary debates about authoritarianism and foreign interference (Jašek, 2019).

In 1968, Alexander Dubček, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, initiated reforms known as the "Prague Spring." This period marked a significant phase of liberalization, including reduced censorship, increased freedom of movement, and the end of persecution against religious communities. The reforms were criticized by the party's conservative wing, with some members appealing to the Soviet Union through a letter warning of the dangers of "Westernization" (Navrátil, 2006).

A defining feature of this era was the use of widespread propaganda in state-controlled media. For instance, the magazine *Reportér* published an article in June 1968 two months before the invasion entitled *Rudí učitelé jdou světem* ("Red Teachers Are Spreading Across the World"). The article deployed anti-Western rhetoric, depicting student movements in the United States, France, and West Germany as violent, chaotic, and manipulated by foreign powers. Students were portrayed as "rozmazlené děti" ("spoiled children") misled by subversive ideologies, with pro-democracy activism framed as naïve and dangerous (Reportér, 1968). This narrative blamed foreign interference and decadent Western values for domestic unrest,

presenting the Soviet bloc, and particularly Czechoslovakia, as morally superior and inherently stable. This framework closely mirrors Fico's current discourse, which casts Western NGOs, EU institutions, and NATO as agents of foreign manipulation, positioning himself as a defender of Slovak sovereignty and traditional values (Sliz, 2023).

Fico's rhetoric during the 2025 protests further echoes the language of 1968. The Communist Party then sought to discredit dissent by portraying student activists as "Westernized" threats to the regime. In reality, the student movements of that era were significant, and posed a genuine challenge to the regime's authority. One of the most striking moments of resistance came in 1969, when philosophy student Ján Palach self-immolated in front of Prague's Faculty of Philosophy as a protest against the Soviet occupation (Blažek, 2009).

Today, Fico similarly characterizes all anti-government protests as a threat driven by foreign actors. As in the past, this narrative frames dissent as the result of Western conspiracies (Fico, 2025). In January 2025, following his December 2024 visit to Moscow, widespread protests broke out across Slovakia, culminating in Bratislava, where approximately 45,000 people took to the streets (Sme, 2025).

On 31 January, Fico held a press conference in which he voiced serious concerns. During the briefing, he spread misinformation by claiming that the protests were orchestrated by the West specifically by Ukrainian President Zelenskyj and Georgian military legions. He warned that the demonstrations risked becoming a "new Maidan" and must be prevented. In an effort to underscore the situation's severity, he convened the Slovak Security Council (Fico, 2025). However, no arrests or interrogations followed, suggesting the move was primarily a populist attempt to foster fear and uncertainty.

Fico is acutely aware of the impact of his rhetoric and deploys it with strategic intent. Dissident, philosopher, and former Czechoslovak president Václav Havel provided a valuable lens for understanding such dynamics. In his seminal essay *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel argued that the most corrosive aspect of totalitarianism is its ability to make people accept lies without question. His concept of "living in a lie" remains insightful for interpreting the emotional mechanics of political nostalgia in Slovakia today.

Under communism, ideological rituals were enacted not out of conviction, but out of conformity best illustrated by Havel's example of the greengrocer who displays the sign "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" simply to avoid trouble (Havel, 1978).

While present-day Slovakia is a democratic state and Fico's rhetoric lacks the coercive force of a totalitarian regime, his emphasis on national sovereignty, moral order, and suspicion of the West echoes the emotional strategies Havel described. Fico does not demand belief through force, but rather encourages voluntary identification with a familiar worldview. Based explicitly on Fico's social media posts, it is evident that he continues to evoke nostalgia by portraying Russia not as an aggressor, but as a historic liberator and natural ally of Slovakia. This narrative builds on familiar historical memories of Soviet "liberation" during World War II and the sense of fraternity among Eastern Bloc countries. While Fico previously emphasized Slovakia's position within the West, as a member of NATO and the EU, his recent rhetoric has shifted noticeably. He now presents Slovakia as a sovereign actor pursuing balanced diplomacy "with all sides of the world," but in practice, his messages increasingly criticize the EU and the United States, while promoting closer ties with Russia, China, and Vietnam.

One clear example of this strategy appeared on May 9, 2025, when Fico became the only EU leader to attend Victory Day celebrations in Moscow. He met with leaders from China, Vietnam, and Belarus, publicly praising their resistance to Western influence. On social media, Fico framed the visit as a tribute to shared Slavic heritage and a reminder of historical alliances. He dismissed Western criticism of Russia's war in Ukraine, describing it as an artificial conflict "manufactured by the West" to divide Eastern European and Slavic nations. This messaging relies heavily on emotional symbolism, aiming to revive a sense of historical unity and pride rooted in a simplified version of the past.

Fico's approach reflects Moffitt's (2016) theory of populism as a performance of identity. He does not impose belief through coercion, but instead encourages voluntary identification with a familiar worldview one that centers on national sovereignty, moral order, and resistance to foreign interference. Through emotionally charged posts and symbolic gestures, Fico performs a political identity that resonates with citizens who feel disillusioned with liberal democracy or alienated by Western institutions. His use of nostalgia serves as an affective anchor, offering reassurance and stability by invoking a selectively remembered past of Eastern solidarity.

Such rhetoric acts as a psychological coping mechanism, offering symbolic stability in the face of rapid social change and perceived loss of control, particularly among those marginalized by liberal democracy (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). In this context, political nostalgia becomes a powerful rhetorical tool that simplifies history while fostering a sense of certainty.

This section has traced how Havel's critique of totalitarianism remains relevant in democratic societies today. His greengrocer does not believe in the regime's slogans but displays them out of habit mirroring how individuals in contemporary Slovakia may grow accustomed to Fico's rhetoric without critical engagement. Fico, though elected democratically, uses nostalgic and authoritarian-coded language in a way that risks normalizing these narratives. Just as the greengrocer learned to live with the sign, citizens today may learn to live with and eventually accept such rhetoric as the new normal.

Chapter 3: Post-Peasant Memory in the Algorithm: Fico's Facebook as a Platform for Nostalgia

Chapter Three shifts from the historical analysis of Chapter Two to a study of how these rhetorical strategies are adapted and amplified through social media. Before analyzing Robert Fico's Facebook posts in Section 3.2, Section 3.1 introduces Juraj Buzalka's concept of post-communism as a framework for understanding the cultural logic that underpins this mode of political communication. The goal is not to present a complete theoretical account but to clarify why Fico's nostalgic messaging resonates so strongly with parts of the Slovak public.

Buzalka (2018) defines post-communism not only as a historical period but as a persistent cultural condition, particularly in rural Slovakia. What may appear as nostalgia for socialism is, in his view, better understood as an extension of a post-peasant worldview. This mindset, shaped by past hierarchies and cultural traditions, is socially conservative, anti-elitist, and distrustful of liberal or urban values. It favors familiarity, order, and moral stability, making it highly responsive to populist appeals across the ideological spectrum.

Although nostalgia remains an emotional mechanism, as discussed in earlier chapters Buzalka's approach shifts the focus from emotion to cultural identity. His framework shows that political appeals to the past often serve to affirm present-day belonging and security, particularly

among groups who feel excluded from dominant democratic narratives. This makes nostalgic rhetoric effective not because it promises a literal return to the past, but because it reinforces continuity and predictability in uncertain times.

Introducing Buzalka's concept in Subsection 3.1 creates a conceptual bridge between the historical analysis of communist-era propaganda in Chapter Two and the digital strategies explored in Subsection 3.2. It provides the cultural and anthropological context necessary to understand why Fico's rhetoric, while adapted to the logic of social media, continues to draw on familiar themes such as national sovereignty, social stability, and skepticism toward Western liberalism.

Subsection 3.2 then builds on this foundation by analyzing Facebook posts by Robert Fico from 2023 to 2025, using data provided by Gerulata Technologies (Juno). This case study demonstrates how digital media not only transmit nostalgic messages but also transform them into performative, algorithmically amplified tools of populist political communication. Grounded in Buzalka's theory, this analysis shows that post-communist nostalgia, particularly in its post-peasant form, remains a powerful cultural and political force in Slovakia's contemporary public sphere.

3.1 Post-Communist Nostalgia Through a Post-Peasant Lens

In Slovakia, post-communist nostalgia does not indicate a desire to return to socialism as a political system. Instead, it reflects a longing for the lived experience of life under state socialism, characterized by self-sufficiency, job security, and moral order. Slovak anthropologist Juraj Buzalka terms this affective memory the "people's economy," shaped more by post-peasant values than by socialist ideology. It is rooted in Slovakia's agrarian past and persists today as a cultural lens through which many voters, especially in rural areas and smaller towns, view politics(Buzalka,2018).

Buzalka argues that political engagement in these communities tends to be passive and non-ideological. Rather than aligning with party programs, people respond to figures who appear authentic or "different." Robert Fico's persona aligns with this expectation: he presents

himself as a paternalistic, stabilizing force who speaks directly to their perceived needs, primarily through social media.

This worldview also informs how historical figures are remembered and reappropriated. In recent years, Fico has increasingly referenced Gustáv Husák, the Slovak-born leader of Czechoslovakia during the "normalization" period following the 1968 Prague Spring. Despite Husák's role in political repression, many Slovaks born in the 1970s, Husákove deti (Husák's children), remember his era as one of stability, affordable housing, and predictable social structures. Even those critical of the communist regime often express emotional attachment to this period, particularly in contrast to the perceived chaos of contemporary liberal capitalism. Fico tactically reinforces this nostalgia, invoking Husák in ways that resonate with public memory and national identity, especially online.

Buzalka emphasizes that such figures are effective because they symbolize existential security rather than ideology. He contrasts this with the unsuccessful attempt by former democratic Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda to revive the legacy of Milan Hodža, an interwar statesman known for his civic ideals and vision of Central European cooperation. Unlike Husák, Hodža's liberal and intellectual symbolism failed to resonate emotionally with the Slovak public. According to Buzalka, this failure highlights a broader cultural tendency to favor emotionally charged, paternal figures who evoke order and familiarity. This insight explains why Fico's digital populism thrives on nostalgia more than reformist rhetoric(Buzalka,2012).

3.2 From Rhetoric to Performance: Facebook Nostalgia in 2025

This section analyzes Facebook posts published by Robert Fico between October 2023 and May 2025, using data provided by Gerulata Technologies. The selected period includes his post-election return to power and the months following the assassination attempt on 15 May 2024, a key moment that marked a shift in tone and strategy. Although a direct causal link between nostalgic rhetoric and rising engagement cannot be conclusively proven, the visible spike in interaction beginning in January 2025 coincides with a growing emphasis on emotionally charged, symbolic communication. To see more of my analysis, please check the Appendix.

Chart 1 illustrates the steady increase in the number of followers on Robert Fico's official Facebook page between October 2024 and May 2025. While the graph shows a relatively flat trajectory until the end of December 2024, there is a clear and sustained rise in engagement beginning in January 2025. This uptick aligns with a notable intensification in Fico's rhetorical strategy, including more frequent posts, emotionally charged narratives, and symbolic references to Slovakia's past. The graph helps visualize how digital audience growth correlates with the shift in Fico's messaging, particularly his use of nostalgic rhetoric framed through national trauma, cultural memory, and opposition to liberal values. Although causality cannot be definitively proven from the chart alone, the timing suggests that the emotional and historical appeals embedded in his posts may have contributed to increased resonance with his audience.

After resuming work in mid-2024, Fico's posts began reflecting a more confrontational and ideologically loaded tone. His communication increasingly focused on themes of national sovereignty, protection from external interference, and cultural rootedness. These themes were often framed in opposition to liberal actors like Progressive Slovakia and supranational institutions such as the European Union. His messaging portrayed these forces as foreign, elitist, or disconnected from "ordinary people." A striking example is the comparison between Michal Šimečka and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, both cast as externally influenced figures posing a threat to national identity.

The intensified activity on Facebook also paralleled mass protests across Slovakia, which mobilized around 100,000 people. This context of public tension provided fertile ground for a strategy rooted not just in political critique but in affective resonance. Fico's posts during this period drew on collective memory and national trauma, reinforcing a narrative of lost stability, dignity, and self-determination. His invocation of post-communist and post-peasant nostalgia, as described by Juraj Buzalka, became a key tool for reconnecting with older and rural voters who associated the past with security and social cohesion.

Rather than promoting a return to socialism, this nostalgia offered symbolic reassurance. Posts evoked the memory of stability under leaders like Gustáv Husák or emphasized Slovakia's historic ties to Russia. These messages presented Fico as a protector of national dignity and continuity, aligning with a culturally embedded desire for familiarity and predictability in uncertain times.

In sum, Fico's use of Facebook during this period illustrates how nostalgia can be transformed into a performative digital strategy. His emotionally resonant posts, grounded in historical memory and fear of liberal disruption, helped reframe political conflict as a moral struggle over the soul of the nation. This aligns with the central argument of the thesis: in post-communist Slovakia, nostalgia functions as a strategic tool of digital populist communication, shaping political identity and consolidating power.

The change in tone was evident in several notable posts. On January 10, 2024, Fico commemorated the 111th birthday of Gustáv Husák. Though this post predates the engagement spike, it signaled a shift in strategy, idealizing a communist-era leader who symbolizes stability and order for many Slovaks. On January 2, 2025, Fico accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of harming Slovak public finances by halting gas transit, even suggesting retaliation. While not explicitly nostalgic, the message emphasized protectionism and economic self-reliance. Just days later, on January 5, he criticized Western liberal elites, framing them as threats to Slovak sovereignty, offering a symbolic return to national pride and wholeness.

On April 4, 2025, Fico attended a ceremony at the Slavín war memorial and criticized EU ambassadors for their absence, reinforcing a narrative of historical gratitude toward Soviet liberators and condemning Western hypocrisy. This culminated on May 9, when Fico attended the Moscow Victory Day parade, defying EU disapproval and praising Slovakia's historical ties to the Soviet Union. These events reinforced Fico's positioning as a guardian of "true" Slovak history and a critic of Western liberal influence.

Taken together, these posts show how Fico's digital communication performs nostalgia. Through symbols, anniversaries, and emotionally charged comparisons, he offers rhetorical reassurance grounded in a mythologized past. This aligns with the central argument of this thesis: that in post-communist Slovakia, nostalgia serves not only to evoke memory but to
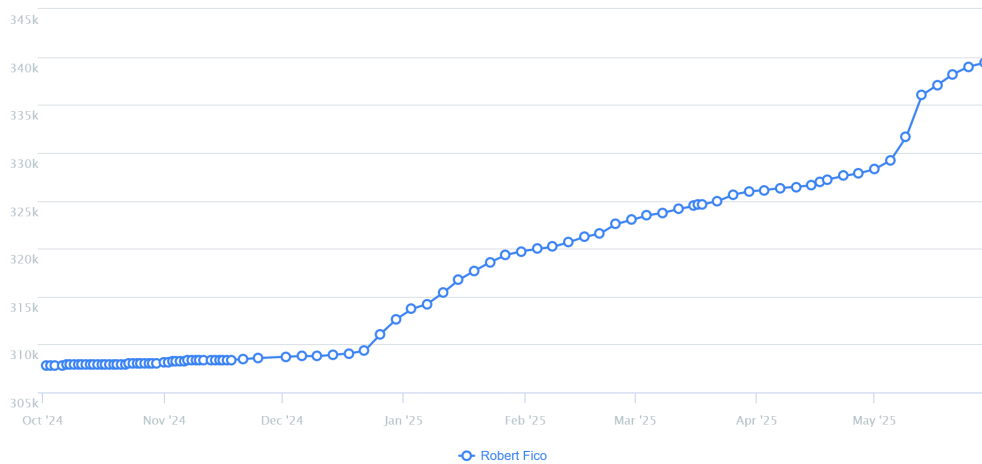
(chart 1)

legitimize identity and consolidate political power through digital populism.

Conclusion:

This thesis set out to explore how nostalgia can be used as a political strategy, focusing on the case of Post-communist Slovakia with Robert Fico's use of communist-era memory and social media. In the introduction, I proposed that nostalgia, often seen as a private emotion, plays a decisive and deliberate role in shaping political discourse, collective memory, and national identity. Through the lens of Svetlana Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia, I examined how Fico reconstructs and idealizes the past not as something to reflect on, but as something to return to a strategy that reinforces his populist rhetoric and strengthens his political legitimacy.

The analysis began by outlining the theoretical background of nostalgia, contrasting its reflective and restorative forms, and showing how its collective dimension makes it particularly useful in politics. Drawing on Boym, Havel, and later Buzalka, I demonstrate that nostalgia is not

just an emotional response but a social and cultural tool, especially potent in societies undergoing transformation or crisis. The first chapter laid out the conceptual foundation. It demonstrated how nostalgia intersects with populism, particularly in digital spaces such as social media, where political messages bypass traditional filters and reach audiences directly.

In the second chapter, I showed how Fico's rhetoric mirrors that of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, particularly in how political opponents are portrayed as enemies of the nation. By drawing comparisons with historical propaganda from 1951 and 1968, I demonstrated how old ideological patterns persist in new forms. Fico's attacks on liberal politicians and Western institutions reveal a consistent strategy: to evoke a simplified, stable past in order to delegitimize opposition and present himself as the only defender of national sovereignty and moral order.

The third chapter brought the argument into the present, showing how these nostalgic narratives are performed and amplified on social media. Through case studies of Fico's Facebook posts from 2023 to 2025, I argue that digital platforms enable a highly effective, emotionally driven form of political communication. These posts draw on the cultural logic of post-communist and post-peasant memory, resonating especially with older and rural voters.

To summarize, this thesis has demonstrated that Robert Fico does not simply evoke the past; he carefully reconstructs it to shape the present. Nostalgia, in his hands, becomes a powerful tool for political persuasion, identity formation, and democratic erosion in a digital age.

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Appendix:

To conduct this analysis, I used the JUNO monitoring platform developed by Gerulata Technologies, which specializes in detecting patterns of political messaging and disinformation on social media. The dataset comprised **a** total of 453 posts published on Robert Fico's official Facebook page between October 2023 and May 2025, covering both his post-election period and the months following the assassination attempt in May 2024. The key search terms used in the software included "Husák," "Rusko" (Russia), "Západ" (the West), "národ" (nation), "tradičné hodnoty" (traditional values), and "suverenita" (sovereignty**), "**Šimečka" ,"Zelenskiy", terms frequently associated with nostalgic or nationalist discourse. Posts were filtered to identify those that referenced the past, historical figures, or Slovakia's geopolitical identity, yielding a focused subset of approximately 75 relevant posts.

It is important to emphasize that the examples quoted below are illustrative, selected to demonstrate recurring rhetorical strategies. For instance, in a post dated April 4, 2025(picture 1), Fico wrote: *"Je smutné, že veľvyslanci EÚ sa nezúčastnili spomienky na oslobodenie Bratislavy, len preto, že tam bol ruský veľvyslanec. Históriu si ctiť musíme, bez ideologických*

okuliarov." ("It is sad that EU ambassadors did not attend the commemoration of Bratislava's liberation just because the Russian ambassador was present. We must honor history without ideological blinders.") This post not only reframes Slovakia's World War II memory in pro-Russian terms but also implicitly contrasts this 'true' memory with liberal Western hypocrisy. Except this is called a memorial for Russian soldiers in Bratislava "Slovak Statue of Liberty".

Through software JUNO I examined, that the post generated significant interaction, with a total of 19,254 engagements, including 14,190 reactions, 2,858 comments, and 2,207 shares. This high level of engagement indicates the post resonated strongly with Fico's audience.

The vast majority of reactions were positive or supportive, with: 11,670 "Likes and 1,904 "Love" reactions

Negative or critical reactions were minimal: Only 76 "Angry", 11 "Sad", and 18 "Wow" reactions, 262 "Haha" reactions, which could indicate irony or sarcasm but are context-dependent

The high number of shares (2,207) suggests that many users found the post worth amplifying, likely because it aligned with shared historical or political sentiments. The relatively low count of angry or sad reactions confirms that the message largely resonated with Fico's base, reinforcing his nostalgic framing of historical memory.

Another post from January 5, 2025, stated: *"Slovensko má právo na vlastnú suverénnu politiku. Nenecháme si diktovať od liberálnych elít z Bruselu ani od mimovládnych organizácií platených zo zahraničia."* ("Slovakia has the right to its own sovereign politics. We will not be dictated to by liberal elites in Brussels or foreign-funded NGOs.") Such language taps into post-peasant and post-communist sensibilities, portraying the present as a battleground for national survival.

(picture 1)

Similarly, in a post from January 2, 2025, Fico accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of harming Slovak public finances by halting gas transit, even suggesting that Slovakia could retaliate economically. This message, while not overtly nostalgic, appealed to themes of economic sovereignty and self-reliance, positioning Slovakia as a victim of foreign manipulation and aligning with Fico's broader narrative of defending national interests.

Chart 2 shows broader engagement metrics related to Robert Fico's Facebook activity over the past year, as recorded by the Gerulata Technologies platform. The graph visualizes

fluctuations in impact (defined as the algorithmically estimated reach and influence), interactions (likes, comments, shares), and views.

The most significant spike occurred in late May 2025, reaching a peak of 3.42 million interactions on May 31. This aligns with increased political activity and emotionally charged posts surrounding Slovakia's geopolitical alignment and symbolic gestures such as Fico's participation in the Moscow Victory Day celebration.

Compared to previous months, the May spike illustrates a significant amplification of Fico's messaging, likely driven by content that combined nostalgia, sovereignty, and defiance toward Western institutions. The sustained increase in views (+37%) and impact (+30%) over the year suggests that this narrative strategy resonated widely and consistently with his digital audience.

The follower counts at the bottom of the chart also confirm continued audience growth, rising by 9% to 340,000. This data provides further evidence that nostalgic and nationalist rhetoric is not only ideologically salient but also algorithmically rewarded in the social media environment.

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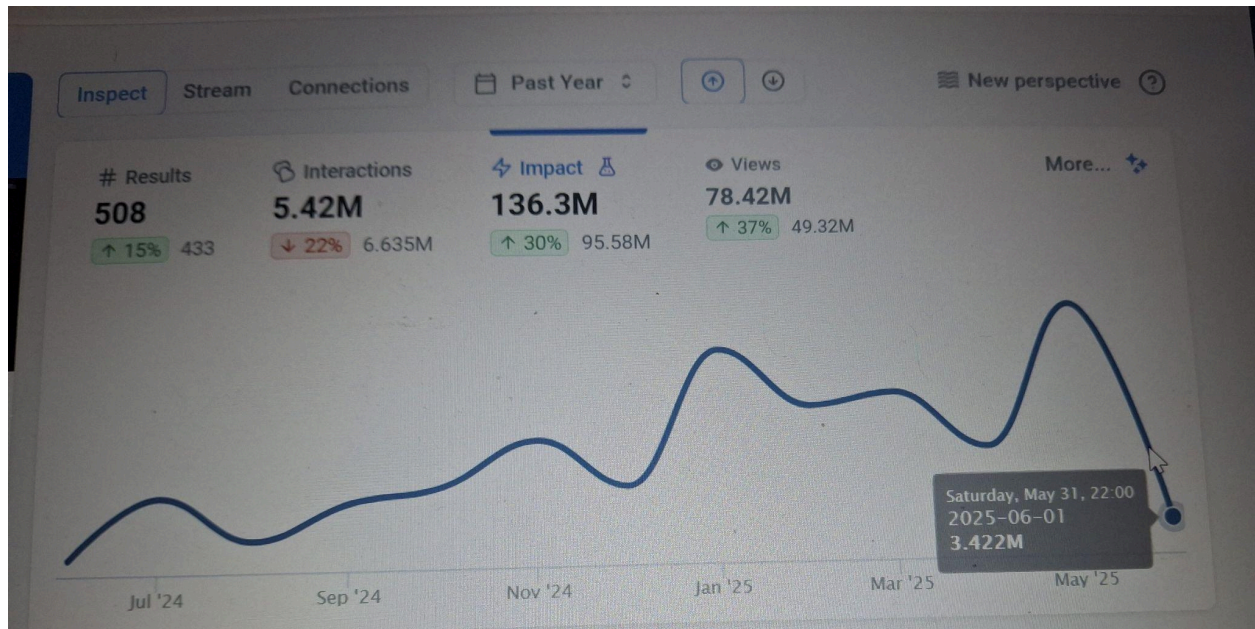
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