The United States in Slovak Political Discourse: Collective Memory and Historical Narrative

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Abstract:

The article focuses on how collective memory and historical narratives are mobilized in Slovakia to shape perceptions of the United States. The relevance of this inquiry is underscored by the increased attention to U.S. foreign policy and transatlantic relations after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The aim of the research is to explore the ways in which Slovak political actors draw upon historical narratives and collective memory to construct the image of the U.S. Specifically, the study examines dominant historical references and mnemonic events, analyzes the narrative and rhetorical strategies of political discourse, and evaluates their functions and implications for Slovakia's national identity and transatlantic orientation.

The methodological framework combines narrative and discourse analysis, situated within the broader perspective of the social construction of national images and collective memory studies. The empirical material comprises speeches and public statements delivered by leading Slovak political figures between 2022 and 2024, which are examined for their use of historical references, narrative structures, rhetorical strategies, and evaluative language. This analytical approach allows for the identification of central mnemonic events in Slovak collective memory, most notably the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Velvet Revolution, that political actors strategically mobilize as reference points.

The findings reveal a clear contrast in the ways these narratives are employed. Pro-Western actors invoke them to emphasize democratic values, transatlantic cooperation, and solidarity with Ukraine, thereby presenting the United States as a

trustworthy ally. By contrast, populist and pro-Russian actors reinterpret the same historical episodes to underscore U.S. dominance and to cast doubt on the legitimacy of its influence. The study shows that historical narratives serve as strategic tools for shaping perceptions, legitimizing policies, and constructing political identities.

Keywords: *Slovakia, United States, Russia-Ukraine war, historical narratives, collective memory, political discourse.*

Introduction

In political discourse, the image of a state functions as a strategic resource, shaping how it is understood by citizens, allies, and rivals, and influencing both policy and public support. This image is never fixed but actively constructed and contested, particularly in response to crises and shifting security environments. Historical narratives and collective memory are central to this process, as political actors selectively invoke the past to legitimize their positions and challenge opponents. The United States, as both a global power and a symbolic reference point, illustrates this dynamic especially clearly.

The relevance of studying these processes has grown sharply following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which renewed attention to NATO, transatlantic security, and the international orientation of Central and Eastern European countries. Slovakia provides a revealing case study. As a young post-communist democracy, it relies on historical narratives and collective memory in shaping national identity and foreign policy. Formally anchored in NATO and the EU, Slovakia's security depends on the transatlantic partnership. Yet public opinion remains skeptical: in 2021, only 17% of Slovaks considered the U.S. their most important strategic partner, while 47% prioritized Russia, and 53% viewed the U.S. as threatening Slovak identity and values (GLOBSEC, 2021). After the 2022 invasion, support for the U.S. rose to 29%, but 39% still perceived it as a security threat (GLOBSEC, 2022). This discrepancy raises key questions about the roots of such attitudes, how the U.S. image is constructed in Slovak discourse, and why it often diverges from official strategic orientations.

In recent years, scholarship on collective memory and political discourse in Slovakia and Central Europe, particularly in the context of Russia's aggression against

Ukraine, has expanded significantly. A special issue of Memory Studies (Vol. 15, No. 6, December 2022) titled Mnemonic Wars: New Constellations addresses the problem of memory conflicts in highly contested, media-saturated environments, examining how historical narratives are instrumentalized in responses to the war in Ukraine and in populist discourse (Misztal & Wüstenberg, 2022). The introductory article focuses on the polarization caused by competing historical interpretations in post-communist Europe and their effects on transatlantic relations (Saryusz-Wolska et al., 2022). Complementing this, research on *"phantom"* borders and imagined territories investigates how symbolic and spatial constructs influence regional identities and political mobilization (Koch & Uzun, 2024).

In studies addressing collective memory in Slovakia, the focus is on the formation of memory around key historical events such as World War II (Borovets & Vidnianskyi, 2022) and the Slovak National Uprising (Naxera & Krčál, 2016; Naxera & Krčál, 2020). Comparative research highlights the problem of contested communist legacies and their inscription into public spaces in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Tomczuk, 2016).

Research on Slovak political discourse in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine addresses problems of polarization and the spread of conspiracy narratives (Lintner et al., 2023), as well as the increasingly negative and aggressive rhetoric of party leaders, particularly in the context of the 2023 elections (Brix et al., 2024; Bundzíková & Janšta, 2024). These studies also examine how far-right actors use collective memory to create mnemonic alliances with Russia (Paulovičová & Gyárfášová, 2023), and which linguistic means and strategies the political elite used in response to the war (Krajčovičová, 2024; Štefančík & Stradiotová, 2024).

In the field of U.S.–Slovak relations, research addresses the problem of understanding the bilateral relationship, framed historically as one of friendship, partnership, and alliance since 1989 (Demeš, 2023). Comparative studies focus on anti-Americanism in post-

communist states (Kasatkina & Shymkevych, 2024), while studies on Slovak education show how curricula and institutional narratives shape perceptions of the United States (Rozenfeld, 2025).

Although existing research has examined collective memory, political discourse, and perceptions of the United States in Slovakia, these dimensions have largely been addressed in isolation, leaving a gap in understanding how historical narratives, collective memory, and political discourse intersect in framing the U.S. image. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on this interplay, offering a comprehensive analysis of how Slovak political actors mobilize historical references to construct competing images of the United States

The main aim of the research is to investigate how Slovak political actors use historical narratives and collective memory to shape the image of the United States. The study has four objectives: to identify dominant historical references and mnemonic events in political discourse, to examine narrative structures and rhetorical strategies used to frame the United States, to assess the political functions of these constructions, and to analyze their implications for Slovakia's national identity and transatlantic relations. By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a better understanding of the strategic use of history in political discourse and the complex ways in which Eastern and Central European states shape the image of global powers.

Methodology

The methodological framework of this study is grounded in the social construction of national images, collective memory studies, and the narrative approach. These perspectives offer a conceptual lens for understanding how Slovak

political actors use historical narratives and collective memory in framing the image of the United States.

The social construction of national images, drawing on constructivist approaches in international relations, provides a key starting point for examining how nations form images through the interaction of ideas, values, and public discourses. It emphasizes that state identities and their perceived roles are not given but emerge through interaction, discourse, and shared meanings (Wendt, 1999). Collective memory studies add a temporal dimension, showing how historical experiences are recalled and reinterpreted to meet contemporary needs. According to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), collective memories are socially constructed frameworks shaped by group interactions, institutions, and cultural practices. Memory studies further distinguish between *"communicative memory"* (informal, generational transmissions) and *"cultural memory"* (institutionalized through rituals, texts, and symbols), highlighting how the latter can be mobilized for political purposes (A. Assmann, 2010; J. Assmann, 2011). It helps explain why certain representations of the United States persist in Slovak political discourse, while others diminish over time.

The narrative approach provides analytical tools to trace how shared meanings of the collective past are created. Political actors use historical narratives to interpret the past and the present, to define future roles, and to set tasks in the political process, including mobilizing public support (Wang, 2018). Narratives also shape the limits of what is considered politically possible or impossible, legitimizing some decisions while rejecting others. From this perspective, every reconstruction of the past is an interpretation made with a specific purpose. According to Hendrik Wagenaar (2011), historical narratives are not objective *"truths"* but analytical constructs, constantly contested and transformed.

Within this broader framework, the study applies narrative analysis and discourse analysis as its main methodological tools. Narrative analysis examines how Slovak political

actors organize historical events into coherent frameworks, emphasizing key actors, moral lessons, and turning points to portray the United States in ways that support specific political positions. Discourse analysis complements this by investigating lexical choices, metaphors, and framing strategies in speeches, statements, and parliamentary debates, revealing how these narratives are communicated, contested, and reinforced in public discourse.

The dataset comprises speeches and public statements by Slovak political leaders, including executive officeholders and party leaders, selected for their influence on public memory and their use of history in political framing. Each speech is treated as a narrative unit, systematically analyzed for historical episodes, the roles attributed to the United States, temporal framing, and evaluative language. This approach allows the study to identify how historical references are mobilized to construct positive or negative images of the U.S. in Slovak political discourse.

The study covers the period from 2022, just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, through 2024. This timeframe includes major domestic political events, such as parliamentary and presidential elections, and coincides with the final year of President Joe Biden's term, avoiding potential shifts in U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump. These years created a politically charged environment in which historical analogies and references gained heightened relevance. To contextualize which historical events shaped collective memory and continue to provide symbolic anchors for political actors framing the United States in today's discourse, this study offers an overview of the formation of collective memory throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries.

The research process was designed to examine how Slovak political actors use historical narratives and collective memory in framing the image of the United States.

For this purpose, we began with a review of how attitudes and images of the U.S. have been formed in Slovak collective memory, with attention to mnemonic landscapes and mnemonic event; we then identified dominant historical references and organized them into main groups according to historical periods in chronological order; we determined narrative constructions and coded them into thematic categories, such as the United States as a liberator, as a hegemon, as a symbol of democracy, or as a threat to sovereignty, with an additional classification of their evaluative orientation; and finally, we analyzed these coded instances in their political and rhetorical context to clarify their strategic function, whether to legitimize policy decisions, mobilize supporters, or delegitimize political opponents. This methodological design makes it possible to explain which images of the United States are constructed in Slovak political discourse, and how and why they are strategically mobilized through collective memory.

Shaping the Image of the United States in Slovak Collective Memory

In Slovakia, a post-communist Central European country, the United States holds a significant place within the national mnemonic framework. The U.S. image has been shaped by recurring narratives, symbolic reference points, and commemorative events that crystallize Slovak collective identity through enduring markers. This memory has not followed a linear trajectory but has evolved through the layering and competition of different historical experiences and interpretations. These competing narratives assign meaning to events involving America, reinforcing both positive and negative perceptions of the country. This raises the question of how such historical constructions continue to influence current Slovak views of the United States.

Early 20th-century immigration and U.S. backing for Czechoslovakia’s independence in 1918 laid the groundwork for the American image in Slovak collective memory. After

World War I and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, President Woodrow Wilson's endorsement of national self-determination presented the United States as a symbol of democratic ideals. This image was reinforced by the Pittsburgh Agreement and the Washington Declaration, which provided diplomatic legitimacy to Czechoslovakia's independence (Krajčovičová, 2009). These mnemonic events were institutionalized through education and public commemorations, embedding the United States as an advocate of Slovak national aspirations.

In the interwar period, the U.S. image became more ambivalent. Large-scale emigration to America created perceptions of opportunity and modernization, while Slovakia's rural and conservative society often regarded American individualism and mass culture as foreign and potentially threatening (Kirschbaum, 2016). Collective memory thus incorporated competing narratives: the United States was seen both as a partner in progress and as a challenge to traditional Slovak identity.

The collective memory of World War II (WWII) in Slovakia became one of the central mnemonic foundations of national identity. Under the Communist regime, this memory was institutionalized through schools, media, and cultural production to promote Marxist-Leninist ideology (Dickins, 2017). The Red Army's liberation of Bratislava in April 1945 was glorified as a heroic act, forming the main pillar of the official narrative. This Soviet-centered view marginalized the role of the Western Allies, including the United States.

The democratic transition of 1989 made it possible to revisit earlier interpretations of WWII. Scholars and public debates started to draw attention to crimes committed not only by the retreating Wehrmacht but also by the advancing Red Army (Kamenec, 2005). In this process, cultural memory, preserved through institutions, helped separate the traditional narrative of liberation from fascism from

critical views of Soviet conduct (Borovets & Vidnianskyi, 2022). With the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic in 1993, the Slovak National Uprising (SNP) of 1944 gradually gained greater prominence in collective memory. This anti-Nazi uprising responded to Slovakia's need for a positive national identity, distancing it from the collaborationist Jozef Tiso regime (1939-1945) (Naxera & Krčál, 2016). The SNP thus became a *"social framework"* for collective memory through which Slovaks interpreted the experience of World War II. Its mnemonic mobilization served as a discursive resource for legitimizing Slovakia's self-representation as a democratic state integrated into the EU and NATO.

The United States occupies a peripheral place in Slovakia's collective memory of WWII, as no shared wartime experience could anchor lasting remembrance. American involvement with the Western Allies, limited to diplomatic support for the Czechoslovak government-in-exile and selective bombing campaigns (Bryant, 2007), was overshadowed by the dominant narrative of Soviet liberation. In the absence of strong shared memory markers and mnemonic symbols connected to the U.S., Slovak remembrance of the war developed primarily around the Red Army and the SNP, while the contribution of the Western Allies was acknowledged mainly within a broader European context.

The collective memory of the communist era in Slovakia, as in other Central European countries, created a complex mnemonic landscape. It was profoundly shaped by Soviet propaganda and the ideological confrontation of the Cold War. The United States was consistently portrayed in state-controlled media, education, and public discourse as an imperialist and exploitative power (Dickins, 2017; Zavacká, 2005). This narrative downplayed the U.S. contribution to Europe's post-war reconstruction, particularly through the Marshall Plan, which Czechoslovakia rejected under Soviet pressure. Nevertheless, American cultural influences quietly permeated Slovak society, embraced by youth and dissidents.

The collective memory of 1968 in Slovakia is shaped not only by the traumatic experience of the Warsaw Pact invasion but also by perceptions of the United States and the broader West. Washington adopted a cautious and restrained stance. The Lyndon Johnson administration viewed Czechoslovakia's reforms as an internal matter of the Eastern bloc and avoided direct involvement, fearing that intervention could provoke a confrontation with Moscow. U.S. support was therefore limited to symbolic gestures, such as official statements of sympathy and coverage in outlets like Voice of America, while it was made clear that no military or political guarantees would be offered (Michálek, 2008). This restrained response entered Slovak collective memory as a reminder of Western limitations. Soviet coercion contrasted with Western non-intervention, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability, and the invasion has been remembered primarily as a traumatic instance of foreign domination.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989, which brought an end to the communist regime in Czechoslovakia and facilitated a peaceful transition to democracy, remains a key mnemonic event in Slovak collective memory. It initiated a reinterpretation of national history and identity, highlighting the roles of both domestic and foreign actors in shaping political change (Kirschbaum, 2016). The subsequent peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Velvet Divorce, reinforced Slovakia's aspirations for political and cultural autonomy, becoming central to the nation's collective memory. At the same time, this period revealed important differences in how the two nations remembered their shared past: although both experienced communism, collective memory in the Czech and Slovak contexts developed in very different ways after 1989. In the Czech Republic, memory is shaped by competition between official actors, such as state institutions, and unofficial actors, including civic groups and activists, who interpret history through the lens of individualism and human rights. In

Slovakia, by contrast, the politics of memory is less contested, being predominantly constructed by state institutions and framed through religion and nationalism (Tomczuk, 2016). This difference highlights the centrality of political and educational discourses in Slovakia's collective memory, which prioritize national unity and historical continuity, and it also sets the stage for how foreign actors, including the United States, are remembered.

In the early years of independence, American support for Slovakia's democratic transition and market reforms was remembered as a formative resource for state-building. The United States provided substantial financial aid through programs such as USAID, which supported economic reforms, infrastructure development, and the strengthening of civil society institutions in the 1990s. Technical assistance in areas such as governance, legal reform, and education also played a crucial role in aligning Slovakia with Western democratic standards. U.S. advocacy for Slovakia's integration into Western institutions, notably NATO and the European Union, further reinforced positive associations with the United States in public discourse (Demeš, 2023). These initiatives were integrated into collective memory as evidence of American commitment to Slovakia's sovereignty and democratic aspirations, forming enduring mnemonic narratives of partnership.

These positive perceptions coexisted with ambivalent memories of the 1990s and the premiership of Vladimír Mečiar (1993-1998), whose authoritarian tendencies and nationalist policies strained Slovakia's relations with the West. Exclusion from the first round of NATO enlargement in 1997 was widely attributed to Mečiar's governance, prompting oppositional voices to revive critical narratives of U.S. power. Rooted in Cold War skepticism, these narratives depicted the United States as a self-interested hegemon imposing its influence over smaller states. Public debates during the late 1990s occasionally framed U.S. foreign policy as prioritizing geopolitical dominance over genuine partnership (Alner, 1998). This dynamic exemplifies *"mnemonic conflicts"* (Saryusz-Wolska et al., 2022), in which the U.S. is

remembered simultaneously as a guarantor of democracy and as a hegemon pursuing its own strategic goals.

In the early 21st century, perceptions of the United States were further shaped by political polarization in Slovakia, U.S. foreign policy, and Russian propaganda. Pro-Western parties with liberal values associated the U.S. with freedom and opportunity, whereas populist-nationalist groups framed it as a threat to national sovereignty (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová, 2018). U.S. military interventions in Yugoslavia (1999) and Iraq (2003) triggered negative memories, reinforcing anti-American sentiment tied to fears of Western dominance and interventionism. Slovakia's involvement in the Iraq War, motivated by NATO commitments, clashed with collective memories of sovereignty, contributing to the rise of populist political movements and intensifying anti-American sentiments in Slovak society (Kasatkina & Shymkevych, 2024).

Public diplomacy efforts created important mnemonic touchpoints. A landmark moment was President George W. Bush's visit to Bratislava in February 2005, the first by a sitting U.S. president, which was widely covered in the media and warmly received in Slovakia (Demeš, 2023). Speeches, ceremonies, and symbolic interactions during the visit reinforced pro-American attitudes and offered mediated experiences that shaped collective memory. Such experiences illustrate how social and cultural frameworks embed political events into broader national narratives (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2010). While direct personal encounters with historical events, such as witnessing U.S. military interventions, shape individual memory, mediated encounters of this kind enabled Slovak collective memory to integrate positive associations with the United States into national narratives.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 increased political polarization in Slovakia. Although Bratislava, as a member of pro-Western EU and NATO institutions, supported anti-Russian sanctions, pro-Russian sentiments remained, strengthened by historical experiences, economic connections, and cultural ties. Russian narratives presented the United States as an aggressor controlling smaller states through NATO, echoing Cold War-era fears (Kasatkina & Shymkevych, 2024). This tension was particularly visible during debates over the U.S.-Slovak Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2021-early 2022, which reflected persistent concerns about foreign military presence (Lewkowicz, 2022) and was interpreted through collective memories of past interventions and the defense of national sovereignty. Thus, the legacy of the Cold War, including U.S. and NATO military infrastructure, nuclear weapons, and ideological confrontation with the West, continued to shape Slovak perceptions of the United States.

The post-Cold War period not only redefined Slovakia's geopolitical orientation but also reshaped collective memories of the United States. An important factor here is the generational dimension of memory. Aleida Assmann's (2010) concept of communicative memory, rooted in lived experience, helps explain these differences. Younger generations, lacking direct communist memories, tended to view the U.S. more positively, supported by cultural exchanges, American popular culture, and opportunities such as visa-free travel (Rozenfeld, 2025). Older generations, by contrast, often associated stability with the communist past, which made them more receptive to Russian narratives. As Michal Vašečka (2022) argues, Slovak anti-Americanism frequently reflected a selective rejection of Western modernity, welcoming its material benefits while resisting its values.

In conclusion, the image of the United States in Slovak collective memory has been marked by shifts rather than continuity, shaped by symbolic events and competing narratives. From Wilson's support for independence in 1918 to the peripheral role of the U.S. in WWII

memory and the restrained response to 1968, the United States remained a distant and ambivalent reference point in Slovak collective memory. The communist era entrenched anti-American propaganda, while 1989 and Slovakia's integration into Western institutions reintroduced the U.S. as a symbol of democracy and modernization. Yet historical ties with Russia and generational differences sustained skepticism, making U.S. interventions and public diplomacy initiatives ambivalent mnemonic touchpoints. As a result, the United States occupies a contested but enduring place in Slovak collective memory, positioned between narratives of liberation, domination, and partnership.

Competing Historical Narratives of the United States in Slovak Political Discourse

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 renewed attention to the United States as NATO's leading power and guarantor of regional security. The threat of war in Europe revived memories of global conflicts and Cold War divisions, encouraging Slovak political actors to invoke historical narratives to frame the current threats. These references, rooted in collective memory, became important in shaping the image of the United States and were strategically mobilized to advance competing political agendas.

Between 2022 and 2024, this contestation unfolded in a deeply polarized environment. The Slovak Republic, as a member state of the EU and NATO, initially aligned with Western partners by providing aid to Ukraine. President Zuzana Čaputová (2019-2024), together with the governing coalition parties Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO), We Are Family (Sme rodina, SaF), For the People (Za ľudí, ZĽ), and Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), emphasized transatlantic solidarity and

presented the United States as an essential guarantor of European security. Yet the 2023 parliamentary elections marked a shift: Robert Fico's Smer-SD (Smer – Sociálna demokracia), a left-populist and nationalist party, returned to power, forming a coalition with Voice – Social Democracy (Hlas – sociálna demokracia, Hlas-SD) and the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana, SNS), suspended military assistance to Ukraine, and depicted the West as prolonging the conflict (Štefančík & Stradiotová, 2024). The result was a pronounced divide: pro-European actors portrayed the U.S. as a reliable ally, while populist leaders mobilized anti-American narratives, presenting Washington as a dominant external power (Kasatkina & Shymkevych, 2024). In this polarized context, historical references became significant instruments of political mobilization, reinforcing divergent interpretations of the United States in Slovak political discourse.

The World War II historical narrative, deeply rooted in Slovakia's collective memory, provides a recurring frame through which Slovak actors interpret Russia's aggression. In the first months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Slovak officials employed historical analogies to frame the current conflict, emphasizing democratic solidarity with EU and NATO allies, including the United States, in the face of new security threats. Through this discourse, they portrayed the Allied powers as central to the broader victory over fascism. Their rhetoric often relied on inclusive terms such as "Allies," "democratic world," or "Western coalition" (Heger, 2022, as cited in Správy STVR, 2022a, 2022; Naď, 2022, as cited in Správy STVR, 2022; Heger, 2022).

This historical narrative approach is clearly reflected in the rhetoric of President Zuzana Čaputová. In her address to Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada on May 31, 2022, Čaputová invoked the Munich Agreement as a historical analogy. She compared this agreement, where Western powers failed to prevent Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, with the international community's insufficient response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In contrast, she

framed the *"democratic world,"* implicitly including the United States, as now acting decisively, turning past hesitation into present solidarity (Čaputová, 2022d). This strategy used historical memory to legitimize appeals for NATO and EU support for Ukraine, while carefully avoiding language that might alienate audiences with Soviet-era sensibilities.

In contrast, populist actors such as Robert Fico deployed the same Munich Agreement reference to advance a different historical narrative. Fico framed Ukraine as a potential victim, drawing a parallel with Slovakia's experience in 1938, when it was *"sacrificed"* to appease stronger powers (Fico, 2024, as cited in Holka, 2024). This analogy invoked collective trauma and national vulnerability, positioning Fico as a defender of national dignity while casting the United States and Western powers as potential threats rather than reliable allies. Through this discourse, populist politicians mobilized historical memory to question Western policies and promote a more critical stance toward transatlantic engagement.

In parliamentary debates, pro-Western politicians referenced U.S. Lend-Lease aid to link historical examples with contemporary military assistance to Ukraine (Krúpa, 2022). They emphasized the importance of collective action, drawing a direct line from Allied unity in WW II to coordinated defense measures today. By contrast, Smer-SD deputies portray U.S. assistance as serving American economic and strategic interests, creating European dependence, and accuse pro-Western politicians of endorsing these policies at the cost of human lives (Blaha, 2023). Through this rhetoric, populist actors transform the same historical and contemporary references into a narrative of Western culpability, using collective memory to question Slovakia's alignment with NATO and the United States.

Following his return to the premiership in 2023, Robert Fico framed WW II commemorations around the decisive role of the Soviet Union in liberating Slovakia, downplaying the contributions of Western allies, including the United States (Fico, 2024, as cited in Správy Pravda, 2024). His public statements emphasized the Red Army's sacrifices, constructing a narrative of historical indebtedness to the Soviet Union. This approach was further reflected in Fico's acceptance of an invitation to attend the 80th anniversary Victory Day parade in Moscow (Fico, 2024). Through these strategies, he positioned the U.S. and NATO as potential provocateurs, portraying Western policies as echoing past imperialism. Thus, these contrasting appropriations of WW II memory highlight its function as a contested resource in Slovak politics. While pro-Western actors employ it to legitimize transatlantic commitments and support for Ukraine, populist leaders use the same references to challenge U.S. influence and advocate closer alignment with Russia.

To strengthen their position in debates about Slovakia's place between East and West, politicians use the memory of the Cold War. This reference shows the ideological struggle of that time and draws parallels between democracy and contemporary authoritarian regimes. Liberal and centrist leaders narrate it not as distant history but as lived memory, positioning the United States as part of the coalition that enabled Slovakia's democratic transition (Heger, 2023, as cited in *Topky*, 2023). Through inclusive terms such as *"democratic world"* or *"transatlantic alliance,"* they embed the United States in a collective struggle against authoritarianism (Čaputová, 2022e).

President Čaputová's speeches illustrate this approach most clearly. In a 2024 discussion at Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute, she recalled growing up under communism, using dichotomies such as *"two parallel worlds"* to dramatize Cold War oppression and link it directly to Russia's current aggression. Her reference to *"the world of Putin against the whole democratic world"* extended Cold War binaries into the present, implicitly underlining

U.S. leadership while framing it within a wider coalition (Čaputová, 2024, as cited in Parker & Morgan, 2024). Similarly, in her 2022 UN address she warned against *"incomplete responses"* to past aggression, drawing on the memory of Western weakness during the Cold War to call for stronger transatlantic action (Čaputová, 2022e).

References to NATO accession are frequently embedded in Cold War memory, where the Alliance is portrayed as the institutional safeguard that secured Slovakia's place in the democratic world. In pro-European discourse, this frame highlights the U.S. as a key guarantor of security yet avoids depicting it as a unilateral hegemon by stressing multilateral solidarity through recurring terms such as *"allies," "stronger together,"* and *"shared responsibility"* (Čaputová, 2022c). In this way, NATO's post-Cold War expansion is cast not as American imposition but as a collective achievement rooted in the lessons of the Cold War confrontation.

At GLOBSEC 2022, Čaputová warned against *"repeating past mistakes"* and presented Ukraine's fight for freedom as part of a wider democratic struggle, drawing explicitly on Slovakia's own transformation experience (Čaputová, 2022c). A year later, at the NATO Vilnius Summit, she underlined that the meeting *"brought an unprecedented level of protection for our citizens,"* linking current defense commitments to the symbolic legacy of NATO accession and the broader Cold War victory of the democratic camp (President of the Slovak Republic, 2023). Even in short symbolic gestures, such as her social media posts marking NATO anniversaries, Čaputová reproduced this Cold War-inflected narrative by emphasizing unity and solidarity through slogans like *"we are NATO"* and *"one for all, all for one"* (Čaputová, 2022b; Čaputová, 2023a; Čaputová, 2023b). These interventions reinforce the image of the United States as central within a collective Alliance, embedding

American leadership in a shared transatlantic struggle against authoritarianism rather than presenting it as unilateral dominance.

Populist actors reinterpret Slovakia's 2004 NATO accession through a Cold War lens, framing it not as integration into the democratic camp but as a continuation of U.S.-imposed dominance. In their discourse, accession symbolizes the loss of sovereignty, echoing collective memories of external control from the Cold War era (Schlosár, 2023). Their claims that President Čaputová was an *"American agent"* exemplify the use of Cold War rhetoric, repeatedly invoking historical U.S.-Soviet rivalry narratives to delegitimize a political opponent (Pravda, 2023).

This narrative is most visible in Fico's rhetoric. He frequently employs terms such as *"provocation," "impossible demands,"* and *"neutrality,"* discursively recasting post-Cold War history to shift responsibility for current tensions onto U.S.-driven NATO enlargement. This strategy is visible in his recent statements: in October 2024, he declared that Slovakia would never support Ukraine's NATO membership, describing it as an extension of U.S. expansion (Fico, 2024, as cited in Nilsson-Julien, 2024); in December 2024, he insisted that *"Ukraine won't be invited to NATO"* (Fico, 2024, as cited in Davalou, 2024); and in June 2024, he warned that Ukraine's accession could trigger *"World War III"* (Fico, 2024, as cited in STVR, 2024). Through these interventions, the United States is portrayed not as a guarantor of collective security but as a hegemon whose leadership threatens to reproduce Cold War divisions. In this reframing, NATO accession marks not liberation but the beginning of perilous dependency under American guidance.

Taken together, references to the Cold War function as a key interpretive lens in Slovak political discourse. Pro-European actors draw on this memory to legitimize NATO and U.S. partnerships, presenting American leadership as part of a collective transatlantic effort to defend democracy. Populist actors, in contrast, invoke the same historical framework to depict

the United States as a hegemon whose policies have generated contemporary security risks. Through these competing narratives, references to the Cold War continue to polarize domestic politics and shape debates over Slovakia's role within NATO and its support for Ukraine.

Extending the focus from Cold War collective memory, the Velvet Revolution offers an additional historical narrative through which Slovak political actors negotiate the country's post-communist identity. References to 1989 appear less frequently in constructing the image of the United States, as American support is associated not with the revolution itself but with the subsequent democratic transition. In this framing, the U.S. is not portrayed as the agent of 1989, but as the embodiment of democratic forces that enabled Slovakia's post-communist path.

Pro-Western actors draw on the Velvet Revolution to frame NATO and the U.S. as extensions of the democratic struggle. They employ metaphors of light versus darkness and freedom versus oppression, linking Slovakia's 1989 experience to Ukraine's contemporary resistance. For instance, in Čaputová's 2022 address to the European Parliament, she emphasized the fragility of democracy, echoing the ethos of non-violent resistance from 1989 while situating Ukraine within the same moral continuum (Čaputová, 2022a).

Populist actors, in contrast, marginalize the Velvet Revolution. Robert Fico's claim that he *"did not notice the Velvet Revolution"* (as cited in Marec, 2025) exemplifies a strategy of discursive erasure, reframing 1989 as less significant than the Soviet "liberation" of 1945. On the 35th anniversary of the revolution, protests in Bratislava emphasized Slovakia's integration into Western civilization as the central achievement of 1989 (AP News, 2024). At the same time, Smer-SD held a ceremonial

congress in Bratislava to mark the party's 25th anniversary, without reference to the revolution itself (SME, 2024).

The Velvet Revolution remains a contested symbolic reference. Pro-Western actors mobilize it as a legitimizing narrative for democracy and transatlantic integration, whereas populists downplay its significance. By 2025, debates over the meaning of 1989 have become a proxy for contemporary discussions about NATO, U.S. influence, and support for Ukraine, reflecting the ongoing struggle over collective memory and democratic identity in Slovakia.

In conclusion, these historical narratives demonstrate how Slovak political actors strategically mobilize collective memory to shape the image of the United States. World War II and the Cold War are invoked to present the U.S. as a guarantor of democracy and transatlantic security, while populists reinterpret the same events to portray it as a hegemonic power. The Velvet Revolution, referenced less frequently, frames the U.S. as embodying democratic forces rather than as a direct agent of change in 1989, with pro-Western actors linking it to support for Ukraine and populists marginalizing it. Together, these competing narratives structure domestic debates, media discourse, and public opinion, shaping Slovakia's role within NATO and the broader transatlantic community.

Conclusion

The image of the United States in Slovak political discourse is neither fixed nor uniform but is actively constructed and contested through historical narratives and collective memory. Political actors strategically draw on selected episodes from the 20th and early 21st centuries to frame the United States in ways that support their political agendas, mobilize public opinion, and legitimize policy positions. The research shows that three historical periods: the World War II era, the Cold War, and the post-communist transition, including the

Velvet Revolution, serve as the main mnemonic frameworks through which the United States is represented in Slovak discourse.

World War II functions as a reference point for both pro-Western and populist actors, albeit in different ways. Pro-European leaders invoke the Allied victory and the democratic coalition to emphasize transatlantic solidarity, positioning the United States as a reliable partner in collective security and in response to contemporary threats, such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Populist actors, in contrast, highlight Slovak vulnerability and the limits of Western action, portraying the United States as a self-interested power whose interventions may not align with Slovak interests. This dual interpretation demonstrates the capacity of collective memory to provide symbolic resources that can be mobilized to advance divergent political narratives.

The Cold War serves as a second key interpretive lens. Pro-Western actors use the memory of Cold War confrontation to legitimize Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic orientation, framing the United States as part of a collective democratic struggle against authoritarianism and emphasizing multilateral cooperation through NATO. Populist actors reinterpret the same period as evidence of historical domination, linking U.S.-led NATO expansion to perceived threats to national sovereignty. These competing readings underscore how the same historical experience can be mobilized strategically to support both alignment and critique of transatlantic structures.

The Velvet Revolution and the post-1989 democratic transition constitute a third narrative frame, although it is less frequently referenced in direct evaluations of the United States. Pro-Western actors connect Slovakia's democratization to the broader values embodied by the United States, using the memory of 1989 to legitimize contemporary support for Ukraine and collective security commitments. Populist

leaders, however, marginalize this period, emphasizing alternative narratives such as Soviet *"liberation"* or historical grievances, thereby challenging the U.S.'s symbolic role in Slovakia's democratic trajectory .

Taken together, these findings illustrate that Slovak political discourse constructs the United States simultaneously as a guarantor of democracy, a strategic ally, and, in populist narratives, a potential hegemon. Historical narratives function not merely as neutral recollections of the past but as instruments of political strategy, reflecting broader debates about democracy, sovereignty, and the country's place within the transatlantic community.

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