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Who Believes Slovakia Is Backward? Politics and Class in Slovak Backwardness Narratives

Martino Comelli[1] **and Dominik Zelinsky**[1]

Abstract

This article examines the social and political distribution of "backwardness narratives" in Slovakia, which portray the country as culturally or civilizationally lagging behind the West. Such narratives are commonly attributed to upper-class or middle-class discourse and criticized as a form of self-orientalization, yet their actual distribution across the population has rarely been tested empirically. Drawing on original representative survey data collected in May 2024 and a triangulation strategy including logistic regression, hierarchical cluster analysis, and multiple correspondence analysis, we find that belief in Slovak backwardness is only weakly associated with class proxies such as income, education, or urban residence. Instead, it is strongly influenced by political orientation: liberal and pro-European voters are much more likely to endorse these narratives, while nationalist, sovereigntist, and left-conservative voters tend to reject them. Material circumstances, however, predict whether respondents take a position at all, with the economically insecure more likely to remain ambivalent; among those who do, political identity predicts which one. These findings suggest that backwardness narratives have moved beyond their class origins to function

[1]Institute for Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Corresponding authors:
Martino Comelli, Institute for Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia.
Email: martcomelli@mrtno.com

Dominik Zelinsky, Institute for Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia.
Email: dominik.zelinsky@savba.sk

primarily as symbolic markers of political identity, structuring the cultural boundaries of competing social blocs in Slovakia's polarized public sphere.

Keywords
backwardness, Eastern Europe, Slovakia, narratives, class

Introduction

On May 15, 2024, in the small mining town of Handlová, the seventy-one-year-old poet, activist, and security guard Juraj Cintula attempted to assassinate Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico. Amid the shock and uncertainty that followed the attempted murder, journalists and intellectuals began to grapple with the meaning of Cintula's act. The first op-ed that offered an interpretation was published less than two hours after the event in one of the main Slovak liberal dailies, *Denník N*, an outlet that has long been critical of Fico and his government. Entitled "Attack on Prime Minister Fico is an attack on all of us," the piece argued that "it is now being decided whether we belong among the civilized nations of the democratic West" or among the countries where "politicians are being killed"—like "Russia or Latin America."[1]

It may sound unusual that the reaction to an attempted assassination of the country's most powerful politician would be to weave the event into a civilizational framing, presenting it as a social drama deciding whether the country belongs to the (supposedly) "civilized" West or (supposedly) "uncivilized" non-Western nations. In Slovakia, however, this is a common interpretive strategy that is applied to a variety of issues. As the historian Ľubomír Lipták pointed out, anxiety about technological and civilizational backwardness has been a perennial topic in Slovak society.[2] This tendency acquired momentum after the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989, when modernization theory loomed large in the region, promising that Eastern Europe could achieve democratization and Western living standards by embracing rapid economic transformation toward capitalism.[3] It resurfaces periodically, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, when intellectuals claimed that backward "rural mentality" or "19th-century peasant mentality" was to be blamed, paradoxically, for both overt rule obedience and (later) for lack of discipline and disregard for pandemic restrictions.[4]

Slovakia is not the only country where backwardness narratives resonate. This explanatory tradition has long been popular in many post-socialist and post-Soviet countries since the 1990s.[5] Taking direct inspiration from modernization theory, it provided a seemingly powerful explanans for unruly and incomplete developmental trajectories of many former socialist countries toward the idealized goal of Westernization and liberal democracy.[6] Culturalizing the issue, Western as well as Eastern intellectuals claimed that the source of resurgent nationalism, social conservatism, and economic paternalism in these regions was the cultural lag behind Western Europe—an exoticizing framing well known in Western Europe since the eighteenth century.[7] These narratives were extensively criticized as orientalizing, demi-orientalizing, euro-orientalizing, or self-orientalizing.[8] In the view of many critics, they

obfuscate clear similarities between East and West and often also mask existing class divisions in the supposedly post-class societies of the former Eastern bloc.[9]

Most discussions of self-orientalization seek to unmask it as class-based rhetoric of the winners of the post-socialist transformation. In other words, the nature of the phenomenon is seen as linked to its distribution within social classes.[10] Yet these arguments are largely based on theoretical analysis and textual investigations. The aim of this article is to move beyond this approach and to test this claim empirically. Who actually believes that Slovakia is a backward country, and who doesn't? Based on the results of a representative survey conducted in May 2024, we argue that, contrary to previous literature, the narrative of backwardness, at least in Slovakia, is currently not directly linked to socioeconomic reality. Rather, it is a phenomenon that has likely spread well beyond its milieu of origin. It exists predominantly as a feature of the political field and is part of a discourse that is relatively autonomous from the social structure.[11] In Slovakia's polarized discourse, the narrative of backwardness appears to be an element of the ideological system of the part of society that is politically aligned with Western structures, especially the European Union (represented by parties such as Progressive Slovakia), while it is rejected by the "sovereigntist" political camp led by Robert Fico's SMER. The main class-related distinction seems to be not between those who think Slovakia is backward and those who do not, but between those who state that they have an opinion on the issue and those who state that they have none.

Almost Western: Narratives of Backwardness in Eastern Europe

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Eastern Europe became the focus of Western political and scholarly attention as a laboratory of transformation from authoritarian state socialism toward liberal democracy. This process entailed political pluralization, establishment of new institutions, and introduction of market economy along with neoliberal governance.[12] It also involved hurtling through one of the largest economic crises of the twentieth century, leading to protracted economic deprivation and social disintegration.[13] The result of this process was both a quick rebound of formerly rejected communist parties and the emergence of new neo-nationalist movements.[14]

To many in both East and West, it came as a surprise—paradoxically—that the post-communist countries, burdened by transformation costs and new inequalities, faced both structural obstacles and internal resistance to the new political reality. Perhaps the most popular explanatory framework of the era took cues from modernization theory and argued that the principal explanation for discontent with the transformation was a modernization deficit: the preponderance of traditional social models associated with rurality, as well as social pathologies developed under Communist rule.[15] These ideas linked easily to pre-existing conceptions of "Eastness" that positioned Eastern Europe as the less modern and somewhat exotic periphery of the West, suffering from "Soviet, Russian, Byzantine or even Asian" heritages.[16] This perspective survives until today, with some authors suggesting that the contemporary nationalist wave emerged because

"the governments of those countries institutionalized democracy at higher levels than the values for their respective populations demanded," opening thus an opportunity for "political entrepreneurs" who "recognized the resulting regime-versus-culture mismatches, and learned how to play on them."[17]

These frameworks were enthusiastically accepted by the regional elite, who have often criticized the backwardness of their respective nations and who now sought to signal their own readiness to become perfectly Western and articulate a clear distinction between their own modern values and those of their rowdy compatriots, un-ebullient about marketization, who seemed frozen in the previous political era.[18] One iconic example of intellectual expression of such backwardness narrative is Sztompka's theory of "civilizational incompetence."[19] Sztompka argued that "life under communism has produced a unique legacy, lasting cultural syndrome" that kept Eastern and Central Europe "from attaining the goal of democratic polity, market economy and open culture."[20] According to Sztompka, the problem was not political, but cultural—unlike Western countries, which underwent (supposedly) authentic modernization prior to the twentieth century, Eastern Europe was the realm of "fake modernity" that "imposed modernity in some domains of social life" while preserving "the vestiges of traditional, premodern society . . . in other domains."[21] The resulting subjectivity was, in the memorable phrase of Józef Tischner, that of "homo sovieticus."[22] The idea of homo sovieticus, currently also innovated as "homo PiSicus," was popular in Poland, but it has many regional versions, including "serf mentality" in Hungary, Slovakia, or Serbia.[23]

Not all discussions of regional specificity need to be semantically loaded with ideas of backwardness, however. This is true particularly of the broader discussion about the unique character of "Central Europe," as opposed to "Eastern Europe."[24] Here, authors analyze problems of economic and industrial under-development, ethnic variability, and social stratification that made the region distinctive in relation to both East and West—in many ways a "hybrid" between the two.[25] Very often, however, the "Central Europe" argument became a form of essentializing and culturalizing position-taking vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, emphasizing that countries of the Central European space must not be analytically lumped with supposedly more "Eastern" regions like Russia or Ukraine, because they belong to a *sui generis* category aligned with the West and only "kidnapped" by the Soviets.[26] In recent years, the idea of Central Europe has been re-appropriated by parts of the populist right to claim authentic Europeanness in contrast to the supposedly declining West.

In this research, we focus on the negative evaluation of one's country as backward and lagging—a broad family of "backwardness narratives." These narratives are global in essence, meaning that they emerge across the world, but especially in semi-peripheries and peripheries of global development. Here, they are created and used by social actors (whether local or external) who facilitate closer integration with regional and/or global centers of economic, cultural, and political power. As is also clear from this literature overview, backwardness narratives fulfill a host of auxiliary functions including explicit distinction-making between the speaker and parts of society or

practices that are identified as supposed obstacles to societal, economic, and cultural progress.

Backwardness narratives in Eastern Europe have been criticized for being used in an orientalizing or self-orientalizing discourse, which culturalizes backwardness and creates a sense of fundamental difference between local populations and the culture of the center (in this case, the West). As Scheiring recently argued, for example, the emphasis on cultural backwardness fails to take into account the problems of political economy, leaving the whole burden of transformation success on the shoulders of subjects.[27] Discussing democratic backsliding, for example, Scheiring writes that "culture and norms play an essential role in regime change, but they can only be interpreted in the context of local and global economic and power relations."[28] The main criticism, however, has been that these narratives are a veil of class—that they are a rhetoric used by the upper and middle classes to justify uneven outcomes of transition by placing the symbolic guilt upon the shoulders of those who lost in it. As Scheiring writes, "the dominant disposition of elites, including many social scientists and economists, was to blame the losers of the transition for their own situation and to stigmatize them as uncivilized and demagogue if they voiced their grievances."[29] According to Kalb, following 1989, "social divisions became openly expressed in new public vocabulary of cultural hierarchy from above" as "intellectuals and professionals began to identify themselves boisterously as middle class and civil"; working-class politics in the form of "unruly peasant and worker demonstration" was "rejected as a form of uncivil and irresponsible 'claiming behaviour' that had to be rooted out."[30] Analyzing the euro-orientalist discourse, Adamovsky claims that it is a "form of class ideology."[31] In a similar vein, Ishchenko recently criticized the discourse of backwardness as the parlance of the Eastern European "professional middle classes" who aspire to become a kind of "comprador bourgeoisie aligned with transnational capital."[32]

While critiquing the backwardness narratives is certainly relevant, most of these analyses are theoretical or textual deconstructions and political critiques. However, backwardness narratives, and the accompanying self-orientalization, are a social phenomenon that, over time, becomes entrenched in belief systems, political discourses, and vernacular talk of Eastern Europeans. Therefore, theoretical analysis—while certainly productive—is not enough to adequately understand them, their meaning, and their social functions. Among other problems, we need to understand who, in fact, subscribes to backwardness narratives. So far, very few works have attempted this.[33] In this article, we propose a pilot quantitative study of the distribution of self-orientalizing backwardness narratives, testing in particular the presumption that this is an elite discourse that is restricted to the middle and upper classes or the so-called "winners of globalization."

Postpeasants Forever? Contextualizing Backwardness Narratives in Slovakia

Our study examines the case of Slovakia, often overlooked in comparative studies of Central and Eastern European countries. Slovakia is a good representative of both the

general political dynamic of post-communist development and a country where backwardness narratives play an important social role. Backwardness narratives have a long tradition in Slovakia, since unlike neighboring Czechia, Poland, and Hungary, the modern Slovak state does not trace its roots back to an imperial past or a long tradition of statehood. To the contrary, the area that came to be modern Slovakia has long been a part of other states, whether the medieval Hungarian Kingdom, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or modern Czechoslovakia. Especially since the late nineteenth century and the development of Hungarian nationalism, Slovaks, like other Slavic ethnicities of the former Transleithania, suffered from limited political and cultural opportunities and active Magyarization policies of the Hungarian state. The emergence of Czechoslovakia changed this, but it also brought Slovakia under the influence of the more economically and culturally vigorous Czech nation-building project.[34] This lasting position of dependency created an accentuated dynamic within the ethnically Slovak elite, which developed a tendency to oscillate between conservative nationalism, even adopting fascist politics during the era of the short-lived independent Slovak republic (1939–1945), and embracing national projects of the culturally dominant hegemons—whether Hungarian or, later, the Czech one.

Since 1993 and the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Slovak politics have been dominated by sharp conflict between center-right and occasionally center-left forces and social-nationalist political bloc.[35] This polarizing political conflict maps onto the observed urban–rural conflict in Slovakia, in which the largest and richest urban areas like the capital Bratislava or Košice, where both domestic and foreign investments concentrate, tend to vote overwhelmingly for the center right, supporting parties such as the liberal-conservative SDKÚ (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union), the liberal SAS (Freedom and Solidarity), or the centrist Progressive Slovakia.[36] The rest of the country gravitates toward political alternatives that combine culturally conservative and socially-oriented rhetoric such as HZDS (Movement for Democratic Slovakia), SNS (Slovak National Party), or SMER (Direction). Labels such as "pro-Western" or "pro-Russian" are often too easily attached to these camps, but they tend to fit only imperfectly. While SMER, for example, has certainly often been critical of the EU, especially its migration policies and, recently, its stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its leader Robert Fico has often voiced the necessity for the country to remain in the "core of the EU."[37] At the same time, members of the center right camp have often been Eurosceptic—this is especially true of SAS, which has, especially in the years following the European sovereign debt crisis in 2011, been the main Eurosceptical force in Slovakia.

The binary structure of two hostile political camps that rarely intermix easily lends itself to backwardness talk and self-orientalizing dynamics.[38] While the nationalist camp tends to mobilize narratives suggesting that the center-right collaborates with foreign forces and pronounce them traitors to the nation, the center-right—including intellectuals supporting it—often weaponizes self-orientalizing frames, arguing that nationalist supporters are heirs to the country's historically conditioned backwardness.[39] While these narratives tend to expound specificities of Slovak history, which supposedly make Slovakia different from Western Europe, they in fact often rely on

familiar turns of phrase employed across Eastern Europe, focusing especially on the rurality of the country. The sociologist Michal Vašečka, for example, claims that sources of SMER's electoral victory lie in the fact that "Slovakia is formerly rural country, exposed to Enlightenment in 19th century, but this Enlightenment took root only in urban areas."[40] According to Vašečka, Slovakia "is in principle a clan society . . . it is not individualized liberal environment, where people achieve something when they strive, educate themselves, have success. . . . It is truly a clan society, basically untouched by modernity."[41] The recent non-fiction hit *Postpeasants* by the anthropologist Juraj Buzalka suggests that behind Slovak's tendency to vote for nationalism is their rootedness in rural culture and the moral economy of the peasant household.[42] Reviewing the book, the prominent Slovak intellectual M. M. Šimečka argued that "four fifths of Slovak have rural mentality despite having better houses than I in the city, more modern gadgets than most of you, but mentally they are still in the 19th century."[43]

The combination of a near-binary political structure, inter-elite cleavage, and entrenched backwardness narratives makes Slovakia a model case for understanding the social distribution of self-orientalization in Eastern Europe. While there are certainly important nuances in the phenomenon across the region, as well as compared to other semi-peripheral and peripheral countries where backwardness narratives and self-orientalization loom large, Slovakia presents a case that may very well show important directions for further research. Based on the literature reviewed above, which emphasizes the links between backwardness narratives, class projects, and geopolitical positioning (in the form of relation to economic, political, and cultural centers, in this case the EU and the West), we formulate three key hypotheses to position our research.

H1: Perceptions of backwardness will be more prevalent among high-income individuals and urban areas.

Hypothesis 1 focuses on the role of class (measured by income and urban domicile) in the distribution of the backwardness narrative. Drawing on previous analyses, we expect local elites to be more likely to adopt the backwardness narrative as a form of justificatory discourse that is used to explain social privilege and establish symbolic boundaries between deserving and undeserving citizens.[44] Adopting the backwardness narrative is potentially a way for the elite to portray itself as modern and progressive and therefore deserving the benefits of their social position. In contrast, we hypothesize that individuals living in rural areas or with low income will be less likely to adopt the backwardness narrative, as they are often targeted by this narrative and described as the backward segment of society. Moreover, their experiences of economic marginalization, deindustrialization, and reduced access to global economic networks may lead to indifference toward backwardness narratives.

H2: Perceptions of backwardness will be more prevalent among individuals with a Western geopolitical orientation.

Building on the literature, we propose that perceptions of backwardness align with self-perceived adherence to Western values. Specifically, narratives of backwardness will correlate with support for European Union membership. As authors writing on backwardness narratives and their use in self-orientalization argue, these symbolic structures have (at least in Eastern Europe) predominantly been used by West-leaning strata of society, which views Western countries, especially EU members, as more culturally advanced than Eastern Europe. We therefore expect that individuals with a more positive outlook on the European Union and Slovakia's integration in it will be more likely to view the country as backward. At the same time, we expect those with a dimmer view of the European Union to be less inclined to adopt backwardness narratives, as they are more likely to subscribe to nation-oriented perspective that emphasizes the virtues of the Slovak people rather than their faults.

H3: Perceptions of backwardness will be more prevalent among individuals with a liberal political orientation.

We hypothesize that perceptions of backwardness are strongly influenced by political orientation. Supporters of pro-Western and liberal parties will be more likely to adopt the backwardness narrative. For these individuals, backwardness serves as a justification for advocating modernization, European integration, and alignment with Western political and cultural norms. This perspective is consistent with the view that Slovakia needs to catch up with Western Europe and reinforces the narrative of progress through integration. In contrast, conservative and nationalist voters are less likely to endorse narratives of backwardness, as these narratives may conflict with their emphasis on national pride, cultural uniqueness, and skepticism of Western influence. Similarly, voters aligned with leftist ideologies, particularly those who hold favorable views of Slovakia's socialist past, are expected to reject backwardness narratives. For these individuals, the socialist period may be seen as a time of relative stability or equality, in contrast to the post-transition discourse that portrays the socialist era as a time of stagnation.

Methodology

This study draws on a nationally representative online survey ($N = 1{,}200$) conducted in Slovakia in May 2024, designed to capture attitudes toward national identity, historical legacies, and geopolitical alignment. To reflect Slovakia's demographic diversity, the sample was stratified by gender, age, region, education, and settlement size. Analyses exclude respondents supporting parties with fewer than ten supporters in the sample, those reporting a presidential vote other than for the two main candidates, and those placing themselves at the midpoint of the left-right scale, leaving an analytic base of 699 respondents. All variables, ranging from socioeconomic status (e.g., income brackets, educational attainment) to political orientation (e.g., party preference, pro-/anti-EU stances), were operationalized as categorical or ordinal measures,

ensuring methodological consistency across analytic stages (see correlation table in Annex 1).[45]

Under the institutional rules applicable when the survey was conducted, prior ethical approval was not required for anonymous, non-experimental survey research. In a position statement dated July 22, 2026, the ethics committee of the authors' institution confirmed that prior approval was not required and that the collection and subsequent use of the anonymized data complied with the institution's ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and no directly identifying information was collected. The anonymized dataset is publicly archived and available at the Slovak Archive of Social Data (SASD2024005).

To explore opinions about Slovak backwardness, we asked: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Slovakia's history makes the mentality of its inhabitants less advanced compared to other EU countries?" Given the limited empirical research on such narratives, we formulated this statement based on local discourse along three key dimensions.

First, the term "mentality" is commonly used in the backwardness narratives in Slovakia and Eastern Europe more generally. The term, as Denys Gorbach argues in his analysis of Ukrainian discourse, "implies a certain set of innate psychological traits, allegedly typical for people living in a given geographical area or belonging to a given ethnic, racial, or social group."[46] Consider, for example, an interview with "twenty-four-year-old Slovak worker" Anton, published on online portal tvnoviny.sk, who notes that "what I don't like in Slovakia is the mentality of the people."[47] Another example of public expert use of the term could be an interview with a Slovak state attorney, who claims that "real problem [of Slovakia] is the Slovaks' mentality."[48] The term is locally so successful that it has been even used as a social scientific concept in Slovak sociology.[49]

Second, historical context is often cited in academic and popular discussions as shaping Slovak mentality. Pundits have argued, for example, that Slovakia's predominantly rural character precluded its development into the Enlightenment. As sociologist Michal Vašečka claims, for example, "Slovakia was less impacted by the Enlightenment than other neighboring states."[50] According to Vašečka, this "relates to the fact that Slovaks were mainly a rural nation, the cities were inhabited by Hungarians, Germans, and Jews."[51] The repertoire of quasi-historical reasons blamed for political problems is fairly wide, however, with historian Peter Švík claiming, for example, that "the historical backwardness of Slovakia is linked to the battle of Mohács," which caused economic and eventually cultural delay in Hungary's development.[52] Since then, Slovakia often "seeks to return to the world it came from and from which it mentally never fully disentangled itself . . . the periphery of Western civilization that dotes on the authoritarian leaders of Oriental despotism."[53]

Third, the explicit comparison with "EU countries" reflects their frequent association with the West as a symbol of progress and modernity. This perspective, rooted in Cold War narratives and revived in recent debates (especially with regard to Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine), positions Western Europe as the normative benchmark of civilization and values. Consider, for example, that the worker Anton, in the

interview quoted above, complains about the Slovak "backwardness in some issues in which other countries of the EU, especially the Western ones, have moved somewhere else."[54]

This phrasing of the question was deliberately broad to encompass a variety of backwardness narratives. While this approach limits our ability to analyze specific causal relationships or distinct lines of reasoning, it allows us to capture a wide spectrum of sentiments and perceptions.

Of the 1,117 respondents who gave a substantive response to the backwardness question ("Slovakia's history makes the mentality of its inhabitants less advanced compared to other EU countries"), 40.8 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 33.2 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 26.0 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. A further eighty-three respondents selected "don't know" and are excluded from this denominator and from all subsequent analyses. To focus on polarized attitudes, subsequent analyses excluded midpoint responses ($N = 827$).

To disentangle the sociopolitical underpinnings of backwardness narrative endorsement, we employ a tripartite analytic approach combining logistic regression, hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA), and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). This multi-method design bridges individual-level predictors and aggregate sociopolitical structures, addressing the limitations of any single technique.

First, logistic regression models the likelihood of agreement with perceived backwardness, leveraging the binary nature of the dependent variable (agree/disagree). We estimate logit coefficients using a sequential nested approach: a "Class" model isolates socioeconomic and demographic predictors (age, income, education), a "Politics" model introduces political variables (party preference, EU alignment), and a "Combined" model integrates both sets to test whether political orientation mediates class/age effects. This sequential strategy adjusts for confounders, tests mediation, and ensures robust inference at the individual level. One supplementary model isolates party voting to assess its unique contribution. Additional robustness checks include ordered logit models retaining the three-category response and KHB decomposition for mediation analysis.

Second, to extend the analysis beyond individual-level associations, HCA groups variables into empirically derived clusters using weighted average linkage and squared Euclidean distances. Weighted linkage assigns equal weight to the clusters being merged regardless of their size, mitigating bias from disproportionately large or small groups. This reveals how variables like income, education, and party preference cohere into distinct pro- and anti-backwardness blocs, exposing structural patterns obscured in regression. The resulting dendrogram hierarchically visualizes sociopolitical alignments, clarifying how variables diverge or converge in their associations with backwardness perceptions.

Last, MCA complements regression and HCA by mapping relational structures between categorical variables (e.g., political affiliation, education, urban/rural residence) in a low-dimensional geometric space. By reducing variables to orthogonal dimensions, MCA visualizes latent ideological axes (e.g., political vs. socioeconomic cleavages) that shape narrative endorsement. This graphical representation captures

symbolic oppositions (e.g., "pro-EU" vs. "anti-EU") and affinities (e.g., "low education" and "rural residence"), enriching interpretations of HCA-derived clusters and regression results.

While logistic regression isolates individual predictors, it risks overlooking structural dynamics. HCA addresses this by identifying aggregate sociopolitical blocs, but clusters alone cannot explain the relational logic underpinning these groupings. MCA bridges this gap by exposing latent dimensions that align with sociological theories of ideological conflict.[55] Together, these methods move beyond statistical significance to uncover how individual attitudes and collective structures interact in shaping perceptions of backwardness. The next section details the variables used in the analysis, beginning with bivariate explorations of how backwardness perceptions vary across sociodemographic and political categories.

Descriptives

Contrary to expectations from prior literature on backwardness narratives in Eastern Europe, bivariate analyses reveal only weak associations between backwardness perceptions and class-related measures. Income, occupational class, and subjective financial situation show no association at all: Cramér's V is 0.07 or below in each case. Education and settlement size are statistically significant but barely stronger ($V = 0.12$ in both cases), and neither follows a class gradient: agreement is highest among the least and the most educated and lowest among those in between, and higher in villages than in cities. The political variables are two to four times stronger: EU support ($V = 0.28$), coalition alignment ($V = 0.40$), and presidential vote ($V = 0.50$). The contrast in magnitude, rather than the absence of significance, is what challenges the presumed class basis of these narratives and points to the need for explanations beyond class (Figure 1).

Subjective financial situation appears inert only because that comparison is restricted to respondents who took a side. About a third of those who find it hard to make ends meet gave no position at all, against one in eight of those who find it easy: $V = 0.26$, compared with 0.01 for the direction of opinion. Material circumstances shape whether people engage with the question, not which way they answer.

Age, however, emerges as a key sociodemographic factor (Figure 2). Younger respondents predominantly view Slovak mentality as less developed, while most seniors disagree, a pattern supported by a significant chi-square test.

Beyond age, political preferences strongly predict backwardness perceptions (Figure 3). Voters of the governing coalition (SMER, HLAS, and SNS) and the far-right Republika are less likely to see Slovakia as backward compared to supporters of oppositional center-right parties (Progressive Slovakia, the Christian Democratic Movement, Freedom and Solidarity, Democrats, and the "Slovakia" movement). This divide is mirrored in the April 2024 presidential election preferences: four in five of Ivan Korčok's voters (opposition) view Slovak mentality as backward, while seven in ten of Peter Pellegrini's voters (governing coalition) disagree.

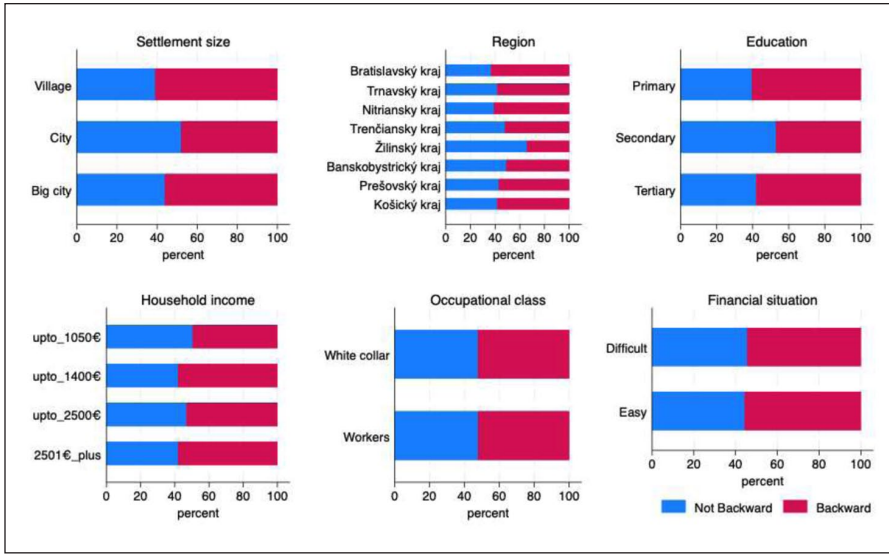


Figure 1. Bivariate analyses of backwardness with regard to class proxies.

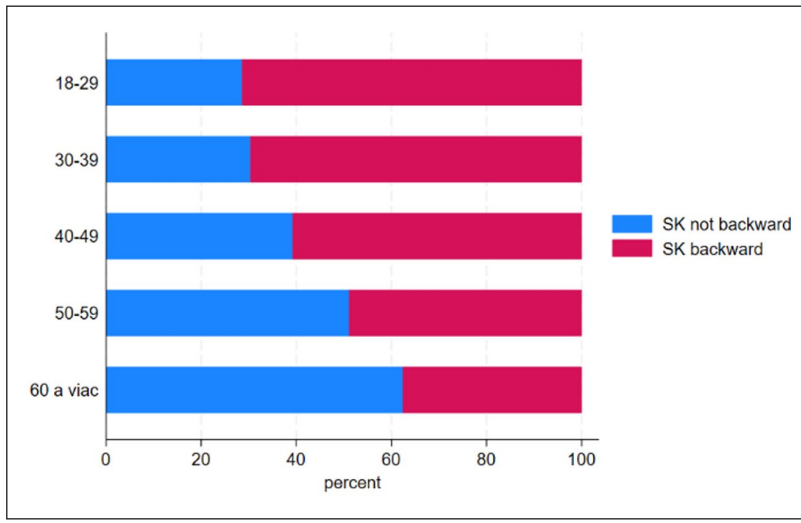


Figure 2. Age and backwardness.

A parallel trend appears with attitudes toward EU and NATO membership. Pro-EU and pro-NATO respondents are significantly more likely to perceive Slovak mentality as backward (Figure 4), a finding consistent with post-Ukraine invasion political debates, where the opposition's critiques of the government's perceived shift toward

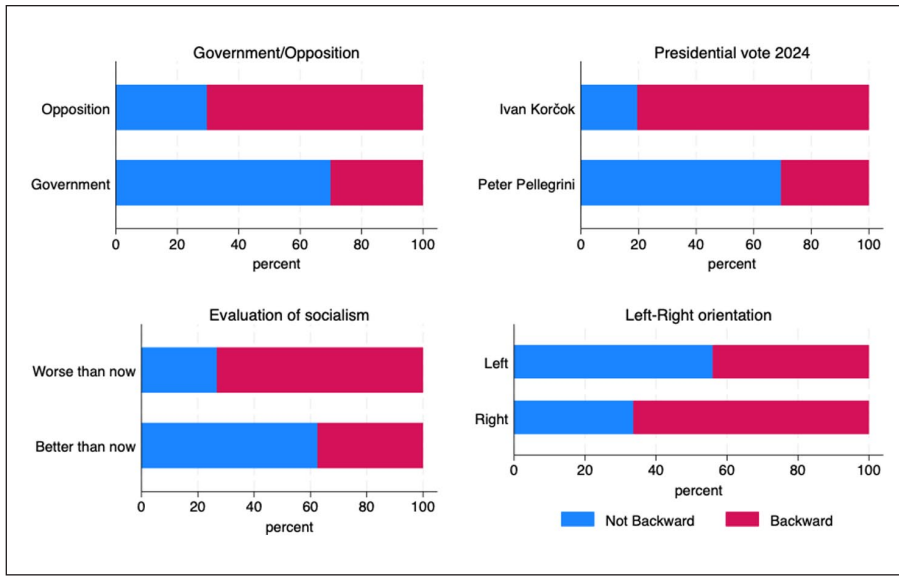


Figure 3. Political preferences and the backwardness narrative.

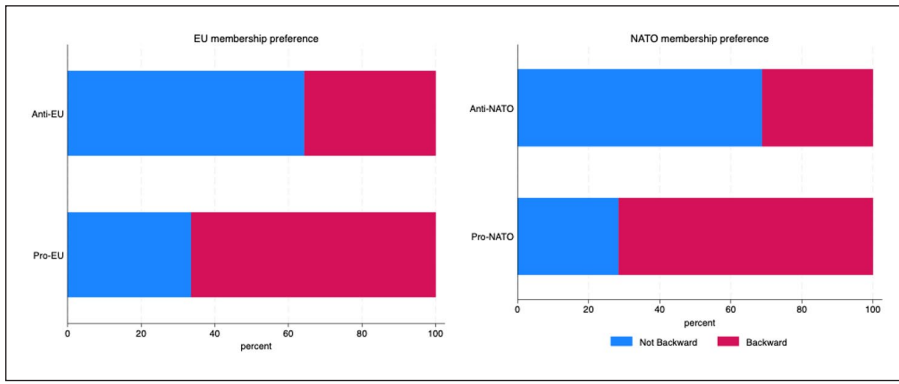


Figure 4. Preference for EU and NATO membership and the backwardness narrative.

Russia highlight tensions over Slovakia's Western alignment.[56] Given the high correlation between the two, only EU will be considered in the rest of the analysis (see correlation table in Annex 1).

Multivariate Analysis

Moving beyond descriptive statistics, we apply logistic regression analysis to test the hypotheses we previously outlined concerning the social and political influences on these perceptions (Table 1).

Table 1. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Agreement That Slovakia Is Backward (Logit Coefficients).

	Class (1)	Politics (2)	Combined (3)	Parties (4)
Age group				
30–39	0.017 (0.565)		0.600 (0.812)	
40–49	−0.733 (0.575)		0.348 (0.830)	
50–59	−0.573 (0.572)		0.263 (0.812)	
60 plus	−1.380* (0.540)		−0.319 (0.774)	
Education level				
Secondary	−0.642^{+} (0.356)		−1.082* (0.503)	
Tertiary	−0.048 (0.429)		−0.282 (0.603)	
Settlement size				
City	−0.260 (0.330)		0.104 (0.467)	
Big city	−0.434 (0.646)		−0.776 (0.839)	
Region				
Trnavský kraj	−0.956 (0.791)		−0.909 (1.095)	
Nitriansky kraj	−0.683 (0.767)		−0.320 (1.037)	
Trenčiansky kraj	−0.721 (0.783)		0.659 (1.129)	
Žilinský kraj	−1.700* (0.785)		−1.268 (1.033)	
Banskobystrický kraj	−1.557^{+} (0.807)		−1.097 (1.087)	
Prešovský kraj	−0.816 (0.772)		−0.107 (1.063)	
Košický kraj	−0.579 (0.652)		0.197 (0.894)	
Household income				
Up to €1,400	−0.201 (0.418)		0.309 (0.595)	
Up to €2,500	−0.280 (0.408)		0.157 (0.549)	
€2,501 or more	−0.989* (0.498)		0.054 (0.666)	
Occupational class				
Workers	−0.114 (0.322)		0.334 (0.445)	
Financial situation				
Easy	0.581^{+} (0.352)		0.021 (0.478)	
EU support				
Pro-EU		1.018** (0.312)	1.142* (0.479)	
Government/opposition support				
Government		−0.329 (0.377)	−0.066 (0.589)	
Presidential vote 2024				
Peter Pellegrini		−1.667*** (0.413)	−1.656* (0.660)	
Left-right orientation				
Right		0.207 (0.287)	−0.281 (0.439)	
Evaluation of socialism				
Better than now		−0.004 (0.352)	−0.229 (0.525)	
Party preference				
HLAS—Social Democracy				0.386 (0.345)
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)				1.216** (0.429)
Hungarian Alliance				0.645 (0.701)
Progressive Slovakia				2.867*** (0.359)
Republika				−0.837^{+} (0.489)
Freedom and Solidarity (SAS)				2.026*** (0.402)
Slovak National Party (SNS)				−1.840 (1.053)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Class (1)	Politics (2)	Combined (3)	Parties (4)
Slovakia, For the People (coalition)				2.254*** (0.595)
Democrats				2.948*** (0.777)
Don't know				0.963* (0.482)
Intercept	2.249* (0.911)	0.427 (0.375)	1.195 (1.333)	−0.868*** (0.204)
Number of observations	251	356	183	477
Pseudo R^2	.12	.23	.28	.24

Note. Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded 1 for agreement or strong agreement that Slovakia's history makes the mentality of its inhabitants less advanced than in other EU countries, and 0 for disagreement or strong disagreement; neutral responses are excluded. Reference categories are 18–29 (age group), primary (education level), village (settlement size), Bratislavský kraj (region), up to €1,050 (household income), white collar (occupational class), difficult (financial situation), anti-EU (EU support), opposition (government/opposition support), Ivan Korčok (presidential vote 2024), left (left-right orientation), worse than now (evaluation of socialism), and SMER (party preference). Models differ in sample size by design: financial situation and EU support are dichotomized by dropping the midpoint of each scale, so respondents at the center of those scales leave any model that includes them.
$^{+}p < .1$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

The hypothesis that perceptions of backwardness are more prevalent among high-income individuals and urban residents (H1) is not supported by the data. In the Class (1) model, respondents in the highest income bracket are significantly less likely to endorse backwardness narratives—the reverse of what H1 predicts—and the coefficient does not survive the smaller sample of the Combined (3) model, let alone the political controls. Urban residency shows no significant effect in either model. Regional location matters only in the Class (1) model, where two regions (Žilinský and Banskobystrický) show lower endorsement, and those effects disappear once political variables are controlled. Education behaves differently: respondents with secondary education are consistently less likely to endorse backwardness narratives, while tertiary education is indistinguishable from primary. Age appears as a notable factor in Class (1), with respondents aged 60 and over less likely to endorse backwardness. Here, unlike income, the coefficient survives the change of sample and falls only once political variables enter, which suggests age is not a standalone driver. An age–income interaction adds nothing ($\chi^2(8) = 9.50$, $p = .30$): young respondents endorse backwardness at similar rates whatever their income, so the generational pattern appears to reflect political socialization rather than intra-cohort class differentiation.

The hypothesis that perceptions of backwardness align with a Western geopolitical orientation (H2) receives strong support. A pro-EU stance consistently predicts greater endorsement of backwardness narratives across models. In the Politics (2) model, pro-EU respondents are significantly more likely to agree with these perceptions, and this effect holds, at similar magnitude, in the Combined (3) model. This robust finding suggests that individuals favoring EU integration are more inclined to view Slovak mentality as less advanced, possibly reflecting a critical perspective tied to aspirations

for Western alignment. The persistence of this effect underscores the importance of geopolitical orientation in shaping these attitudes.

The hypothesis that perceptions of backwardness are more prevalent among those with liberal political orientations (H3) is supported. With SMER voters as the reference category, supporters of Progressive Slovakia, Freedom and Solidarity, the Slovakia movement, and the Christian Democratic Movement are all significantly more likely to endorse backwardness narratives, while Republika and the Slovak National Party fall below SMER. In predicted probabilities, this runs from around 88 percent among Progressive Slovakia and Democrat voters to 29.6 percent of SMER voters and 6.3 percent of Slovak National Party voters. The ordering does not follow government status. Republika sits in opposition but records the second lowest endorsement of any party (15.4%), below both SMER and HLAS (38.2%), and the opposition Christian Democrats (58.6%) and Hungarian Alliance (44.4%) fall well below the liberal opposition parties. What divides the parties is geopolitical and cultural orientation rather than incumbency, which is consistent with the pro-EU effect in Models 2 and 3. Support for President Peter Pellegrini likewise reduces endorsement across models. Likelihood-ratio tests on the respondents common to all three models confirm the asymmetry: adding the five political variables to the sociodemographic model improves fit sharply ($p < .001$), whereas adding the twenty sociodemographic parameters to the political model produces no detectable improvement ($p = .21$).

Mediation analysis using the KHB method indicates that political orientation transmits part of the age effect but not the education effect. Education shows no indirect pathway through EU attitudes, and its total effect is in any case indistinguishable from zero. Age behaves differently: roughly a fifth of its total effect runs through presidential vote, while government or opposition alignment transmits none of it. Political identification therefore carries some of the generational pattern, though the direct effect remains the larger component (see Annex 2).[57]

As a robustness check, we estimated ordered logit models retaining the neutral category. Results are consistent with the binary models: secondary education, pro-EU stance, and Pellegrini vote all operate in expected directions, though with slightly attenuated significance (see Annex 3). A Brant test showed that financial situation does not operate uniformly across the response scale; its influence differs depending on which opinion transition we examine. Generalized ordered logit, fitted to accommodate this heterogeneity, reproduces the same pattern: hardship is associated with ambivalence, while financial security pushes respondents toward both poles, to outright rejection or full endorsement (see Annex 3). What determines which pole they move toward is not material circumstances but political orientation.

From Individuals to Aggregates: Hierarchical Cluster Analysis and Multiple Correspondence Analysis

While microdata may be helpful for initial orientation, we believe that for a more sociological consideration of the interaction between class, politics, and backwardness narratives, it is necessary to look at the political and social field in an aggregated

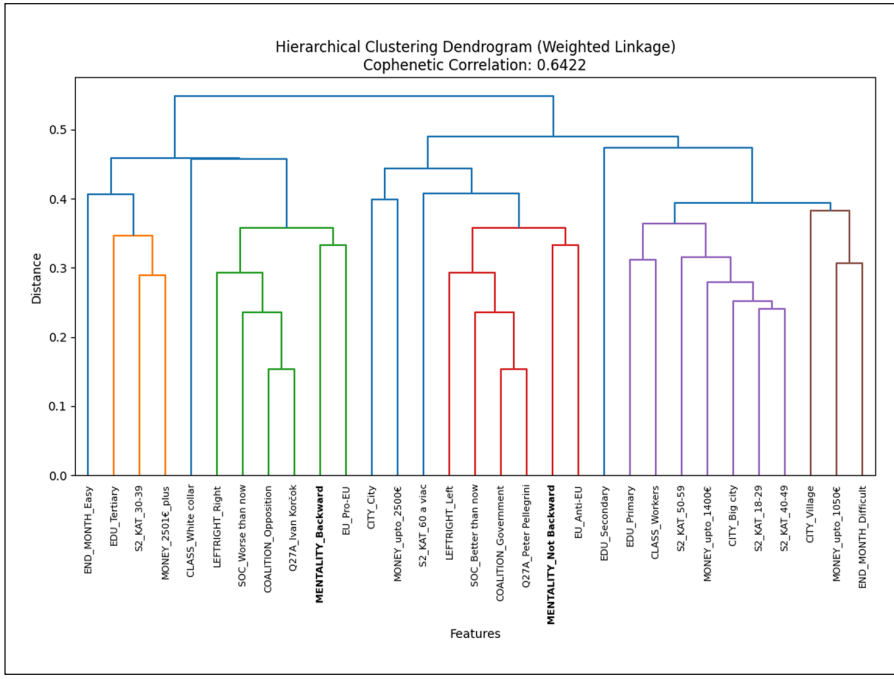


Figure 5. Hierarchical cluster analysis dendrogram demonstrating the relation between socioeconomic variables, political preferences, and the backwardness narrative.

manner rather than rely on individual answers. By triangulating the previous results of multivariate logistic regressions with HCA (Figure 5) and MCA (Figure 6), we begin to see a different pattern: that while the domains of class and politics are indeed distinct realms, they are not separated at random. On a higher level of analysis, class and narratives of backwardness are related.

The hierarchical clustering dendrogram, with a cophenetic correlation of .6422, indicating that the dendrogram represents the underlying distances only approximately, reveals a structured association among essential socioeconomic and political attributes. The dendrogram distinctly identifies two primary clusters, each containing unique subgroups, highlighting clear patterns in perceptions of backwardness. Of particular interest are the red and green clusters, as they exhibit mirrored structures intricately tied to distinct political orientations.

The green cluster links narratives of national backwardness with pro-European sentiments, electoral support for the center-right presidential candidate Ivan Korčok, opposition-party voting patterns, critical evaluations of the socialist period, and right-wing political identification. Conversely, the red cluster links the absence of backwardness narratives to EU skepticism, electoral support for incumbent President Pellegrini and the ruling left-conservative coalition, positive assessments of socialism, and self-identification as politically left-wing.

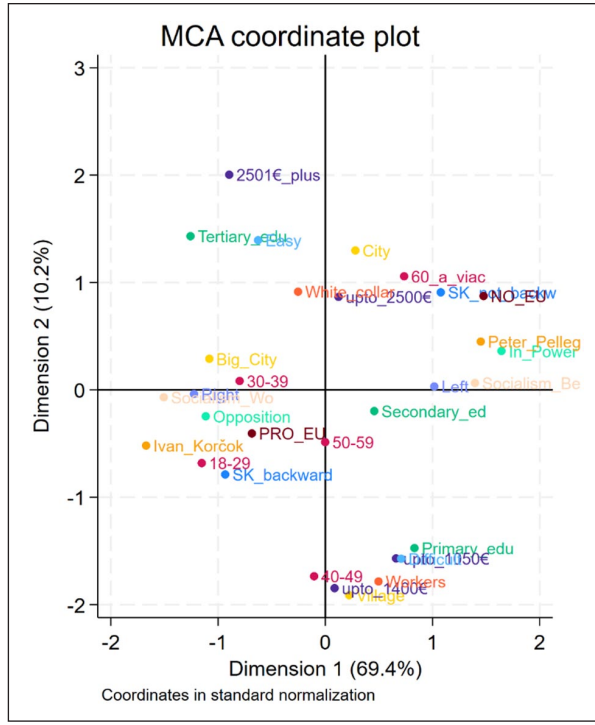


Figure 6. Multiple correspondence analysis plot.

Although distinct, these clusters are nested within broader super-clusters defined by additional sociodemographic characteristics. The green cluster merges with an adjacent subgroup (orange cluster) characterized by tertiary education, higher income levels (exceeding €2,500 per month), and relative financial security. Collectively, these attributes signal a forward-looking socioeconomic and political orientation aligned closely with liberal and pro-EU positions.

In contrast, the red cluster integrates into a socioeconomically disadvantaged super-cluster (including the purple subgroup), characterized by lower income, frequent financial insecurity, and lower educational attainment (primary or secondary education). This subgroup consistently demonstrates skepticism toward EU integration, favorable view of the socialist era, and strong preference for political continuity and stability. Economic vulnerability and limited educational opportunities thus reinforce defensive or possibly nostalgic political attitudes.

Ultimately, the cluster analysis delineates a clear duality of social blocs: a pro-EU, economically advantaged, politically right-leaning bloc (orange-green), and an economically disadvantaged, educationally limited, left-leaning, or conservative-nationalist bloc (purple-red). The alignment of backwardness narratives with specific economic conditions, educational backgrounds, and political orientations highlights the multidimensional structure of these social blocs.

In Annex 4, an additional attempt was made to include political parties explicitly. The analysis revealed that supporters of Progressive Slovakia distinctly embrace narratives of backwardness consistent with pro-European and liberal attitudes identified in the primary clusters, which matches the predicted probabilities reported above. Other political parties exhibited no clear pattern, and given the modest cophenetic correlation, this grouping should be read as suggestive rather than confirmatory.

The MCA plot is structured alongside two dimensions. The first (Dimension 1) explains 69.4 percent of the adjusted inertia and refers to the political realm, and the second a further 10.2 percent. On the left, we find those who voted for the oppositional presidential candidate Ivan Korčok, or for the opposition parties, and on the right those who voted for Peter Pellegrini and the ruling coalition. The second (Dimension 2) refers to the vertical axis and entails socioeconomic variables (see Annex 5 for the details). At the top, we find wealthier, more educated, urban voters. In the lower part of the plot, we find poorer voters living in rural areas, more likely to work in working-class occupations and having difficulties making ends meet. Backwardness perception is much better represented on Dimension 1 than on Dimension 2, with squared correlations of .80 and .08, confirming that these narratives position respondents within political camps.

These results further integrate the findings from the multivariate regression and the cluster analysis by providing a visual representation of the relative autonomy of politics from socioeconomic and sociodemographic factors in the distribution of the backwardness narrative. In the upper left quadrant of the MCA plot, we see people from the upper-middle class with university education, high personal income (over €2,501 per month, against an average gross monthly wage of €1,520 in the second quarter of 2024, when the survey was fielded),[58] high subjective economic satisfaction, and working in white-collar jobs. Mirroring this group, in the lower right quadrant, we see people with primary and secondary education who experience economic hardship (earning up to €1,400 a month, below the national average), living in villages and working as manual workers. The vertical position of the political categories should not be read too closely, however: presidential vote and coalition alignment are almost orthogonal to Dimension 2, so whether they fall above or below the horizontal axis carries little information. What the coordinates do show is that the class categories divide between the two axes. Tertiary education and residence in a large city sit on the oppositional side of Dimension 1 and are well represented there, close to Korčok and the opposition parties, whereas occupational class and village residence are barely represented on that axis at all and belong almost entirely to Dimension 2. Income and subjective financial security fall between the two and load on both.

At the same time, the results of the MCA suggest an important nuance. While the more affluent respondents are politically aligned with the oppositional camp voting for Ivan Korčok, the youngest voters are not themselves affluent. The 18–29 category sits on the oppositional side of the political axis and is well represented there, but it is barely represented on the socioeconomic axis, so its political alignment is clear while its material position is not. This suggests that there is a certain tendency toward aspirational voting, and a further sign that narratives of Slovakia's backwardness, while

having a class origin, are being adopted well beyond the (relatively) wealthy strata of society. It is clearly taken up by the younger generation who align their identity with the Western project rather than the sovereigntist narrative. With regard to the coalition voters, we see a similar class spill-over: while most under-privileged voters vote for coalition parties, many other coalition voters are among the better-off urbanites and the elderly. This configures class and social group alliances behind political camps that are transversal and could also explain why the narrative of Slovakia's backwardness extends well beyond the realm of class.

Discussion

Academic literature tends to emphasize the role of class in Eastern European backwardness narratives and the self-orientalization that they lead to. We agree that class and classism are clearly present in how these narratives are articulated and deployed in everyday life, where they are used to solidify the distinction between oneself and the supposedly backward society. However, our analysis indicates that the connection between backwardness narratives and class in Slovakia exists mainly through its articulation within political projects, entangled in a host of other lasting or ephemeral cleavages, creating an effect similar to what Don Kalb calls "class without class."[59]

In the spirit of Amable and Palombarini, a social bloc is not merely a coalition of voters or a party alliance, but a relatively coherent configuration of sociopolitical groups that share a project, defined not only by material interest but also by representational frames and political strategies.[60] Backwardness narratives, rather than reflecting economic position per se, seem to serve as symbolic boundary markers used within these blocs (although they are not explicitly articulated by political elites) to distinguish friend from foe, modern from backward, deserving from underserving.[61] In Slovakia, we find that the backwardness narrative cannot be attributed to class in itself—that is, to class as an independent structural factor. Instead, it emerges as a phenomenon of political discourse and a product of the contested configuration of social blocs. What matters is not so much the class background of individuals, but the political and symbolic frameworks through which their identities and affiliations are formed. In other words, class matters, but only in and through its articulation within political projects.

This is reflected in the data. Indicators such as income, education, and occupational status do not reliably predict who adopts backwardness narratives. Instead, variables related to political preference, such as support for specific parties or presidential candidates, and attitudes toward the EU are consistently and strongly associated with endorsement or rejection of the idea that Slovak "mentality" is less developed than that of other EU countries. The generalized ordered logit analysis adds further nuance: material circumstances determine whether respondents enter the ambivalent middle, but political identity determines whether they exit it toward critique. Backwardness narratives require both distance from material precarity and pro-Western political orientation. This suggests that backwardness narratives now function less as expressions of socioeconomic position and more as boundary-drawing devices within political

discourse, used by adherents of the sociopolitical alliance behind current Slovak opposition.

Our cluster and correspondence analyses further underscore this point. Rather than forming cohesive class-based camps, Slovak voters cluster into political blocs that cut across economic lines. Young, less affluent voters may share backwardness narratives with wealthier, older urbanites, not because they belong to the same class, but because they share a political worldview. Similarly, rejection of backwardness unites both working-class rural voters and segments of the urban middle class who identify with sovereigntist or left-conservative politics. These alignments suggest that the meaning and distribution of backwardness narratives are being reshaped by political conflict and symbolic contestation more than by socioeconomic position alone.

Ultimately, our analysis suggests that backwardness narratives in Slovakia have become one of the symbolic markers through which adherents of the political blocs define themselves and distinguish themselves from their opponents. It is entirely possible that they do not simply reflect existing social cleavages, but they help constitute them. As such, they are deeply political phenomena: tied to struggles over national identity, historical memory, and the imagined place of Slovakia in the wider European order. This allows us to understand backwardness discourse as part of a broader symbolic struggle over what it means to be "modern," "Western," or "Slovak."

Conclusion

This article presents a pilot empirical investigation into the distribution of backwardness narratives in Slovakia. These narratives have historically permeated Eastern European self-perceptions and have frequently been critiqued as discursive instruments tacitly reinforcing class distinctions.

When asked whether Slovak mentality is less developed than in other EU countries, 41 percent of respondents agreed, 33 percent disagreed, and 26 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. Financial circumstances determine engagement rather than position: financial hardship predicts selecting the scale midpoint, while financial security increases both firm rejection and full endorsement, pulling respondents toward both poles. Among those expressing opinions, we tested three hypotheses linking backwardness narratives to class position (H1), Western/EU orientation (H2), and liberal political orientation (H3). H1 receives no support: socioeconomic indicators show weak and inconsistent effects. H2 and H3 receive strong support: pro-EU attitudes and opposition to sovereigntist parties consistently predict positions on backwardness.

Methodological triangulation through cluster and MCA analyses demonstrated again that backwardness narratives align with the political dimension, which accounts for 69.4 percent of the adjusted inertia, rather than with the socioeconomic dimension. Age initially appears predictive. Around a fifth of its effect runs through political alignment; the remainder is not explained by the variables we model, but it is estimated too imprecisely in the combined sample to stand on its own. Young voters align politically with affluent liberals in endorsing backwardness even though their own material position is not clearly marked, while those rejecting it unite rural workers and

older, more comfortable urbanites across class lines (with regard to our class proxy indicators).

Our findings suggest, therefore, that while there is a class element to the belief in backwardness, things are more complex. We suggest that backwardness narratives have become detached from their socioeconomic origins and now instead operate as markers of political identity. The economically precarious largely remain ambivalent, declining to take a side either way. Among those with certain material security, who have a position on the backwardness issue, political orientation becomes the primary factor shaping their views. What emerges is a fundamental cleavage between two competing political visions of Slovakia: one seeking deeper Western European integration, the other asserting sovereign autonomy and national tradition. These political positions have a certain class "center of gravity" but can become attractive beyond this central electorate.

Further studies of this phenomenon are needed, however, and we would like to conclude this article by acknowledging the limitations of our pilot study. First, our methodology relies on only one survey item. For improved results, it will be necessary to follow up with a more detailed scale. Such an approach could potentially lead to a more exhaustive analysis that might be able to distinguish different kinds of backwardness narratives that might exist across social groups and thus introduce a more nuanced exploration of the social and political background of this rhetoric. Second, our research is limited in its scope due to the national frame of our analysis. One potentially productive extension would be a cross-country comparison across Eastern European nations. Slovakia is certainly not a unique case, but the relation of Slovak population to Slovak statehood is specifically shaped by the experience of sharing the state with other nations, such as Czechs and Hungarians. This fact might indeed impact our results. Therefore, future designs should take regional and national specificities into account and take advantage of a comparative approach.

ORCID iDs

Martino Comelli https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9640-0310
Dominik Zelinsky https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0069-4316

Ethical Considerations

Under the institutional rules applicable when the survey was conducted, prior ethical approval was not required for anonymous, non-experimental survey research. In a position statement dated July 22, 2026, the ethics committee of the authors' institution confirmed that prior approval was not required and that the collection and subsequent use of the anonymized data complied with the institution's ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and no directly identifying information was collected. The anonymized dataset is publicly archived at the Slovak Archive of Social Data (SASD2024005).

Consent to Participate

Participants provided informed consent electronically before completing the online survey.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. The article contains no identifiable individual-level information.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the conceptualization, interpretation, drafting, and revision of the article. Martino Comelli conducted the quantitative analysis and prepared the visualizations. Dominik Zelinsky contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and the literature review. The discussion and conclusions were jointly developed. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The anonymized data are publicly available through the Slovak Archive of Social Data as GEOPREF 2024: Individual Geopolitical Preferences in Slovakia, version 1.0, SASD2024005, https://doi.org/10.34877/sasd_2024005.

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Author Biographies

Martino Comelli is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Dominik Želinský is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences. His work focuses on general sociological theory, cultural sociology, and political sociology. His works appeared in journals such as *Sociological Theory*, *Sociology*, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, or *Critical Sociology*.

Annex 1. Correlation Table.

	Mentality	Age	Education	Place	Income	Class	End month	EU	NATO	Coalition/opposition	President	Left/right	Socialism
Mentality	1												
Age	−.3059*	1											
Education	−.0200	.1254*	1										
Place	−.0688	.1317*	.2000*	1									
Income	.0428	−.1339*	.2705*	.0830*	1								
Class	−.0002	−.1264*	−.4179*	−.1158*	−.1092*	1							
End month	.0121	−.0238	.2801*	.2517*	.5448*	−.1275*	1						
EU	.2832*	−.0145	.2486*	.0897*	.1488*	−.1298*	.1045	1					
NATO	.3953*	−.1037*	.2157*	.1083*	.1539*	−.1170*	.1575*	.8125*	1				
Coalition/opposition	−.3970*	.2200*	−.1985*	−.0556	−.1208*	.0779	−.1896*	−.2519*	−.4206*	1			
President	−.5013*	.2126*	−.2541*	−.0990*	−.1378*	.1228*	−.1979*	−.4100*	−.5704*	.7248*	1		
Left/right	.2240*	.0147	.1805*	.0319	.0769*	−.1153*	.0613	.2822*	.3549*	−.3281*	−.3520*	1	
Socialism	−.3587*	.1006*	−.2655*	−.1215*	−.2199*	.1532*	−.1910*	−.4614*	−.5542*	.5196*	.6288*	−.3979*	1

Note. Pairwise correlations within the analytic sample. The number of pairs varies with item non-response, from 273 for pairs involving financial situation to 699.
*$p < .05$.

Annex 2. Mediation Analysis (KHB Method): KHB Decomposition of Education and Age Effects on Backwardness Perception.

	Education → EU → Backwardness	Age → Coalition → Backwardness	Age → President → Backwardness
Total effect	−0.121 (0.271)	−0.244^{+} (0.139)	−0.309* (0.140)
Direct effect	−0.149 (0.271)	−0.242^{+} (0.140)	−0.242^{+} (0.140)
Indirect effect	0.027 (0.046)	−0.002 (0.014)	−0.067^{+} (0.036)
p-value (indirect)	.550	.879	.064
% mediated	Not reported	0.9%	21.8%
N	183	183	183

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. KHB method decomposes total effects into direct and indirect pathways while correcting for rescaling bias in nonlinear models. The percentage mediated is not reported for education because its total effect is not distinguishable from zero, which makes the ratio uninformative. Each decomposition controls for every remaining covariate in the combined model, that is, for all variables other than the predictor being decomposed and its hypothesized mediator. The two age decompositions share a direct effect because the underlying full model is identical in both; they differ only in which mediator is isolated.
$^{+}p < .1$.

Annex 3. Ordered Logit and Generalized Ordered Logit Analyses.

Ordered logit model of backwardness perception (ologit)	
	Backwardness (three categories)
Age group	
30–39	0.204 (0.552)
40–49	−0.173 (0.560)
50–59	−0.409 (0.540)
60 plus	−0.689 (0.503)
Education level	
Secondary	−0.701^{+} (0.364)
Tertiary	−0.472 (0.433)
Settlement size	
City	−0.216 (0.322)
Big city	−1.020^{+} (0.604)
Region	
Trnavský kraj	−0.749 (0.788)
Nitriansky kraj	−0.590 (0.747)
Trenčiansky kraj	−0.454 (0.778)
Žilinský kraj	−1.334^{+} (0.697)
Banskobystrický kraj	−1.129 (0.754)
Prešovský kraj	−0.740 (0.717)
Košický kraj	−0.122 (0.597)

(continued)

Annex 3. (continued)

Ordered logit model of backwardness perception (ologit)

	Backwardness (three categories)
Household income	
Up to €1,400	0.051 (0.405)
Up to €2,500	−0.063 (0.411)
€2,501 or more	−0.462 (0.502)
Occupational class	
Workers	0.259 (0.322)
Financial situation	
Easy	0.161 (0.354)
EU support	
Pro-EU	0.640^{+} (0.346)
Government/opposition support	
Government	−0.106 (0.421)
Presidential vote 2024	
Peter Pellegrini	−1.080* (0.437)
Left-right orientation	
Right	0.003 (0.306)
Evaluation of socialism	
Better than now	−0.322 (0.363)
cut1	−2.697 (0.909)
cut2	−1.547 (0.897)
Pseudo R^2	.14

Note. $N = 234$; pseudo $R^2 = .14$. Ordered logit assumes each predictor shifts respondents by the same amount at both steps of the scale. Cut1 and cut2 are the thresholds between the three categories. A Brant test rejects that assumption for financial situation ($\chi^2 = 23.26$, $p < .001$) and presidential vote ($\chi^2 = 4.20$, $p = .040$); the model below relaxes it.
$^{+}p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Generalized ordered logit model of backwardness perception (gologit2)

	Rejects vs. neutral/accepts	Rejects/neutral vs. accepts
Age group		
30–39	−0.743 (0.667)	0.708 (0.616)
40–49	−0.377 (0.591)	−0.377 (0.591)
50–59	−0.475 (0.569)	−0.475 (0.569)
60 plus	−0.655 (0.533)	−0.655 (0.533)
Education level		
Secondary	−0.924 (0.391)*	−0.924 (0.391)*
Tertiary	−0.368 (0.460)	−0.368 (0.460)

(continued)

Annex 3. (continued)

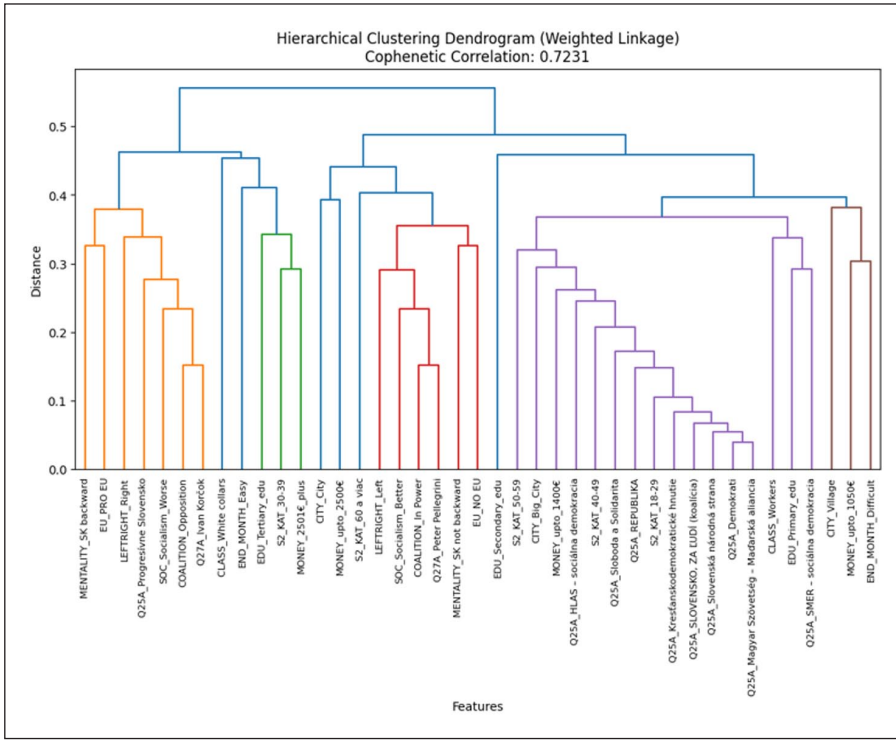
Generalized ordered logit model of backwardness perception (gologit2)

	Rejects vs. neutral/accepts	Rejects/neutral vs. accepts
Settlement size		
City	0.126 (0.346)	0.126 (0.346)
Big city	−0.683 (0.640)	−0.683 (0.640)
Region		
Trnavský kraj	−0.616 (0.839)	−0.616 (0.839)
Nitriansky kraj	−0.645 (0.783)	−0.645 (0.783)
Trenčiansky kraj	−0.536 (0.817)	−0.536 (0.817)
Žilinský kraj	−0.594 (0.768)	−2.114 (0.802)**
Banskobystrický kraj	−1.222 (0.797)	−1.222 (0.797)
Prešovský kraj	−0.959 (0.765)	−0.959 (0.765)
Košický kraj	−1.254 (0.687)+	0.428 (0.651)
Household income		
Up to €1,400	0.099 (0.426)	0.099 (0.426)
Up to €2,500	0.191 (0.428)	0.191 (0.428)
€2,501 or more	0.219 (0.607)	−0.722 (0.562)
Occupational class		
Workers	0.287 (0.342)	0.287 (0.342)
Financial situation		
Easy	−1.708 (0.514)***	1.392 (0.434)**
EU support		
Pro-EU	0.718 (0.367)+	0.718 (0.367)+
Government/opposition support		
Government	−0.131 (0.451)	−0.131 (0.451)
Presidential vote 2024		
Peter Pellegrini	−1.342 (0.515)**	−0.274 (0.491)
Left-right orientation		
Right	−0.045 (0.332)	−0.045 (0.332)
Evaluation of socialism		
Better than now	−1.170 (0.455)*	0.238 (0.439)
Intercept	3.821 (1.009)***	0.321 (0.966)
Number of observations	234	
Pseudo R^2	0.25	

Note. $N = 234$; pseudo $R^2 = .25$. Identical coefficients across columns mean the equal-shift constraint was kept for that term. The automatic procedure freed seven terms rather than the two Brant flagged; the constraints it kept survive a joint test ($\chi^2(18) = 25.09$, $p = .12$). Seventy of 234 cases return predicted probabilities outside 0–1, so magnitudes should be read as indicative.
+$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The Brant test evaluates whether each variable's effect is constant across response transitions (proportional odds assumption). Significant violations were detected for financial situation ($\chi^2 = 23.26, p < .001$) and presidential vote ($\chi^2 = 4.20, p = .040$). The generalized ordered logit model was fitted using an automatic selection procedure that relaxes the constraint wherever a Wald test rejects it at the 0.05 level, which frees seven terms rather than the two flagged by the Brant test alone. The fitted model returns out-of-range predicted probabilities for seventy of the 234 cases, a known limitation of the estimator when fitted lines cross, so magnitudes should be read as indicative.

Financial security predicts having a firm position rather than a particular one. Respondents who find it easy to make ends meet are more likely both to reject the backwardness narrative outright and to endorse it fully, while those in financial difficulty concentrate in the ambivalent middle. The two coefficients for financial situation ($\beta = -1.71$ and $\beta = +1.39$) carry opposite signs because they describe movement away from the middle category in opposite directions.



Annex 4. Hierarchical cluster analysis including parties.

Annex 5. Details of Dimensions in the Multiple Correspondence Analysis.

Dimension 1	Contrib	Dimension 2	Contrib
Ivan Korčok	0.108	Village	0.105
Peter Pellegrini	0.094	Difficult	0.097
Government	0.091	Workers	0.090
Socialism worse	0.091	Easy	0.086
Socialism better	0.084	€2,501 or more	0.082
Opposition	0.062	City	0.065
Anti-EU	0.058	Up to €1,400	0.056
Right	0.057	Tertiary education	0.055
Left	0.047	Up to €1,050	0.052
Slovakia not backward	0.045	White collar	0.046
Tertiary education	0.042	Primary education	0.046
Slovakia backward	0.039	40–49	0.040
Pro-EU	0.027	60 plus	0.035
Difficult	0.020	Slovakia not backward	0.032
Big city	0.019	Slovakia backward	0.028
60 plus	0.017	Anti-EU	0.020
Easy	0.017	Up to €2,500	0.019
€2,501 or more	0.016	Ivan Korčok	0.010
Primary education	0.015	Pro-EU	0.009
30–39	0.011	Peter Pellegrini	0.009
18–29	0.009	Government	0.004
Up to €1,050	0.009	18–29	0.003
Workers	0.007	50–59	0.003
Secondary education	0.007	Opposition	0.003
White collar	0.004	Secondary education	0.001
City	0.003	Big city	0.001
Village	0.001	30–39	0
40–49	0	Right	0
50–59	0	Left	0
Up to €1,400	0	Socialism better	0
Up to €2,500	0	Socialism worse	0