Blog

# DO ELECTION MAPS STRENGTHEN PLACE-BASED STIGMATISATION IN SLOVAKIA?

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# About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

***The urban-rural divide has been one of the most popular topics in societal and political discourse across Europe. Such discourse seems to increase right after election results, as election maps have become the norm in visualisation of political inclinations within a country. Election maps typically portray a clear division between the urban and the rural parts of society, or between different regions. Although these differences exist, the perception that one's place of origin is the determining factor in one's political beliefs has become a polarising narrative.***

*While the focus here is on Slovakia, where place-based (or territorial) stigmatisation has been normalised in day-to-day discussions, this is not an isolated case. This is rather a global phenomenon visible across societies to varying degrees. However, a specific country focus can provide more depth and understanding of the issue. Slovakia, as one of the most polarised countries in Europe (DEKK Institute 2025, 2), was therefore chosen as the focus of this blog.*

## What is polarisation and why managing it is vital for societies

A crucial aspect of polarisation is the belief that a person with different views does not merely have opinions which one disagrees with, but the person itself is wrong and does not deserve to be engaged with (DEKK Institute 2025, 8). Low levels of polarisation are unavoidable, however, once polarisation turns 'toxic' (meaning cyclically self-reinforcing), the repercussions for the affected society are

**Low levels of polarisation are unavoidable, however, once polarisation turns 'toxic' (meaning cyclically self-reinforcing), the repercussions for the affected society are immense** (DEKK Institute 2025, 7-8)**.**

immense (DEKK Institute 2025, 7-8). If left unattended, it can eventually lead to societal collapse. In toxic polarisation, people of opposing beliefs change from rivals to enemies, shifting behaviour from rational to an emotional one, that of a threat response. This can lead to dehumanisation and efforts to exclude the so-called 'other' from society, starting with labelling someone as dangerous or treacherous. Toxic polarisation has deep detrimental effects on the health and longevity of societies (DEKK Institute 2025, 7-8), which is especially worrying in the current climate, when polarisation continues to rise across different societies.

## Are election maps a useful tool for understanding voter behaviour?

Election maps are a common way to visualise voting patterns after elections. However, they can be misleading. Based on election maps in Slovakia, there is a perceived understanding that those who live in larger cities are progressive and therefore voted for the Progressive Slovakia (further as PS) party in parliamentary elections or for Ivan Korčok during the presidential elections. These are usually portrayed in blue. On the other hand, those from regions, smaller towns, villages, or rural areas are considered traditional and therefore voted for the current coalition parties such as SMER and HLAS, or for Peter Pellegrini, the winner of the 2024 presidential elections. These are portrayed in red.

In another election map, which is divided only into regions and not individual towns and villages, in the district of Prešov 17.25% of citizens voted for the SMER party (Colombova 2023). The party won (therefore red on the map), but the same numbers (or even slightly higher) were recorded in multiple sub-divisions in Bratislava, even though PS won (therefore blue on the map) (Colombova 2023).

This has also been noted by a Slovak sociologist, Dominik Želinský, who found that while SMER's focus group are not necessarily people from the largest cities, their electorate consists of 38% of people from such cities (Želinský 2025). Electorate of Progressive Slovakia is made up of 47% of those from large urban areas, which is higher than that of SMER, but shows that in reality more than a half of its voters do not come from large cities (Želinský 2025).

Therefore, while it has been found that on average people in urban areas tend to have more progressive values than their rural counterparts, at least in economically well-off countries (Luca et al. 2023), the picture is more nuanced than it is popular to claim. A study done in the Czech Republic highlights that although the urban-rural divide is very visible as a 'symbolic border' in public discourse, the actual social division is almost non-existent (Pospěch et al. 2025). In a polarised society, the urban-rural divide and regional divide can be just another aspect of 'us' vs 'them' (Želinský 2025).

## Online public discourse based on election maps

**Generally speaking, election maps show that those from urban areas vote opposite to non-urban voters.**

The perception that such visualisation of voting behaviour can cause is visible in online public discourse once election maps are published. The internet is one of the few public places where people living in different regions that do not know one another can communicate easily. Generally speaking, election maps show that those from urban areas vote opposite to non-urban voters, as already illustrated.

Worryingly, such a simplistic understanding of voter behaviour can incite reactions charged with emotions. After the 2023 parliamentary elections, it was not

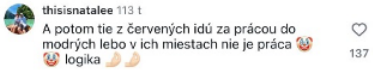
uncommon to see conversations or ‘jokes’ about Bratislava leaving Slovakia and joining Austria, while the rest of Slovakia should enjoy their degeneration, or that Bratislava should become its own state, and leave the rest of the country to reap what it sows.

There is a media post on Instagram from a no-longer active account “Youth News,” showing the results of the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia (Správy Mladí 2023). The title of the post reads “the SMER party took control over 7 out of 8 regions, while Bratislava was won over by the Progressive Slovakia party”. Clearly, the title itself already shows bias, however, the focus here is on the comments under this post portraying an election map:

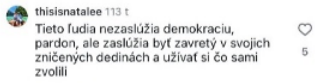
*“According to my observations, Slovakia split into Bratislava and the rest of the country.”* [1]

*“Logically: a big city full of dumb university students and fraudsters, there ‘the left-pronoun-ers’ are doing well.”*

*“I would join Bratislava to Austria.”*



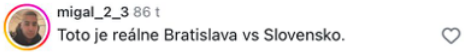

*“And then the people from red districts go to the blue districts because of work, as there is no work in their own.”*




*“These people do not deserve democracy, sorry, they deserve to be locked up in their destroyed villages and enjoy what they themselves have chosen.”*

[1] All comments are translated to English with a photo of the original comment in Slovak/Czech. See bibliography for links to posts.

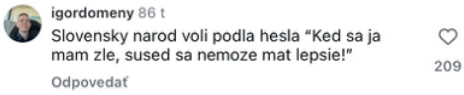
Comments under another post about the Slovak presidential election results in 2024 (Denník N 2024a) included these:



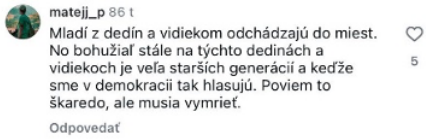

*"This is literally Bratislava versus Slovakia."*

*"Here, we can clearly see that in caves, fortified courtyards, slums and post-communist countryside, the level of literacy and average intelligence is laughable."*

*"Village fascism."*

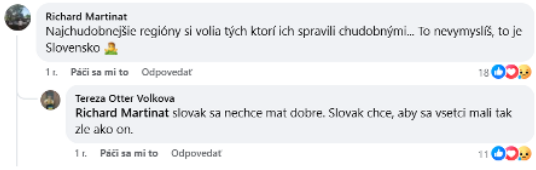



*"The Slovak nation votes according to the slogan 'If I am not having a good life, my neighbour cannot either'."*




*"The youth are leaving villages and rural areas to live in cities. Unfortunately, there are still many older generations that stay and as we are in a democracy, they vote. I will put it bluntly, but they have to die out."*

On the same post on Facebook (Denník N 2024b), other comments include:




*"The poorest regions vote for those who made them poor… You cannot make this up, this is Slovakia. "*

*" A Slovak does not want to have a good life. A Slovak wants for everyone to have as much of bad life as he himself has."*

These comments illustrate that election maps, if done incorrectly, can perpetuate existing divisions in society. Although not all comments under these posts are to the likes of those shown above, the pattern is visible.

According to Loïc Wacquant, the place where one resides has deep effects on how others perceive them and the place itself, but also how people living in 'worse' areas may perceive themselves and where they come from (Wacquant 2007). Most of the comments highlighted above are written by Slovaks to other Slovaks, lamenting about the horrible Slovak mentality present in all Slovak nationals, while also being Slovaks themselves. Additionally, if you come from a place which is perceived as less than, and if you yourself believe that the feeling of shame will make it important for you to distance yourself from those who are a part of that shameful group, according to the principle of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). This can be also seen with the emergence of a new term – 'the democratic voter', portraying others as inherently undemocratic and representing a threat (Majchrák 2023). Judgements like these only increase polarisation.

**Place-based stigmatisation does not happen only within countries in the urban-rural environment, but also cross-nationally.**

Furthermore, place-based stigmatisation does not happen only within countries in the urban-rural environment, but also cross-nationally. According to Tomasz Zarycki, in his book 'Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe', CEE countries like to highlight their Westness and orientalise (Said 1979) other countries of CEE which they perceive to be more 'eastern' (read less modern) than them (Zarycki 2014). While the West will perceive them all as Eastern European, the Czechs have belittling discourse about the Slovaks (Švehla 2023), while the Slovaks have belittling discourse about the countries in the Balkans, or Ukraine. No matter how far east you go, you can always find someone who is more eastern than you.

## Conclusion

Election maps have become a useful tool to understand voting patterns. Nonetheless, their lack of precision can make them misleading and can spur divisive narratives. Through selected comments under media posts presenting election maps, it is visible how misleading information can incite some extreme positions and reinforce already polarised beliefs. As the next parliamentary elections in Slovakia will be next year in 2027, it is crucial to correct such mistakes.

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