

Slovak Coalitions: Getting Glued to a Word

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Not that word

“The Slovak Democratic Coalition is not a *zlepenec*,”² lamented Mikuláš Dzurinda, the speaker of the opposition then, at a Žilina town hall meeting on a mild Saturday in mid-spring of 1998, “we are a *zlepšenec* [the improved version],” he attempted some verbal engineering in order to prevent his audience from thinking poorly of his pre-electoral outfit that brought

together⁵ motley assemblage⁶ likely to come unglued at any time.

Semantics

*Zlepenec*⁷ means approximately “a glued-together hack job” outside of its terminological use and has five traditional, plus one political, semantic attributes in contemporary Slovak that would need to be conveyed by a matching English equivalent. It is expressive (colorful, catchy),

	expressive	understood	pejorative	incongruous	intentional	unglue?
<i>zlepenec</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>English:</i>						
unstable assembly	–	✓	–	±	–	✓
???	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

together parties ranging from the permissive Greens to the forbidding Catholics. To no avail. Well over a decade later, he was still pelted with *zlepenecs* wherever he turned, the quaint word – in search of a precise English equivalent³ – imputing in a memorable way that he wanted the Slovak cabinet to be a grab bag,⁴ clumped-

readily understandable (and fairly common), pejorative,⁸ refers to an object composed of incongruous parts, and implies that the object was put together intentionally (human agency). As used by politicians and political commentators, it also warns that the jerry-built coalition,⁹ ragtag

¹ The English expressions – my thanks go to the colleagues who addressed the semantics and suggested them – fit the semantic categories in the specific political context; Ralph Cleminson, University of Portsmouth, adds a caution that there may not be an overarching English expression with all the connotations in all contexts.

² Ján Filip, “Deň demokracie iskril duchom Markoviča a lídrov SDK.” *Sme*, 27 Apr. 1998.

³ Tim Haughton, participant, Roundtable 8-33 “The Personalization of Slovak Politics: Populism, Nationalism, and Governance.” *ASEEES Convention, Washington, D.C.*, 19 Nov. 2011.

⁴ Suggested by Helena Gosילו, Ohio State University, and Wayles Browne, Cornell University.

⁵ Suggested by Alina Israeli, American University, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Suggested by David Powelstock, Brandeis University.

⁷ Its historical Slovak spelling was *slepenec*, which is also its old and modern Czech spelling. With two exceptions, this English text uses the uniform *zlepenec*, including in the instances when the Slovak or Czech version started with a *s-*.

⁸ Commented on as such by users, e.g., Martin Kóňa, “Manažéri a bratrancei.” *Hospodárske noviny*, 9 July 2010; and marked as such in dictionaries, e.g., Mária Pisárčiková, et al., *Synonymický slovník slovenčiny*. Bratislava 2004; Štefan Peciar, et al., *Slovník slovenského jazyka*, Vol. 5, V-Ž. Bratislava 1965.

⁹ Suggested by Robert Rothstein, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

team,¹⁰ future slap-dash¹¹ cabinet, which is just like a thrown-together clump,¹² might fall to pieces. At its root is the verb *lepit'*, “glue,” pre-fixed as *zlepiti'*, “glue together,” passive participle *zlepený*, “glued together.” In its colloquial, non-technical, figurative use, the noun needs to refer to and comment on something created by people, not an incongruous object that came about through natural forces.

“Orgy” in Italy

The fitting English equivalents of *zlepenec* mostly lack the implication that a poorly glued assemblage of incongruous parts has – the potential to come unglued, precisely the facet of its meaning that, along with *zlepenec* evoking “a ramshackle ragbag,”¹⁴ gained prominence in Slovak political discourse. A political label like *zlepenec* is less likely to have a close parallel in the English-speaking countries whose two-party political landscapes do not result in multi-party cabinets and where broadly-based party affiliation is a given – unlike in Slovakia, or in Italy with its own colorful term, *ammucchiata* (“a heap,” but also “group sex, orgy”),¹⁵ applied to its continually realigning ragtag coalitions of government and opposition parties since at least the 1970s.¹⁶ Leftist radicals broadened the label

¹⁰ Suggested by William Ryan, School of Advanced Study, University of London.

¹¹ Suggested by Robert Channon, Purdue University.

¹² Suggested by Jerome Katsell, translator and editor.

¹³ Massimo Ottavi, “Nuovo Ulivo...” *Ottomax*, 26 Aug. 2010.

¹⁴ I am grateful to John Dunn, University of Glasgow, who spends long periods of time in Italy, for the phrase *ramshackle ragbag* and the suggested comparison.

¹⁵ Tullio de Mauro, et al. *Grande dizionario italiano dell'uso*. Turin, 2003.

¹⁶ E.g., Carmine Pecorelli, “La grande ammucchiata del gattopardo Giulio.”

to the “institutional *ammucchiata*” in order to dismiss the whole existing practice and system of government.¹⁷

Zlepenec has an even older legacy

in Slovak politics, and while the potential of “falling apart” needs to be added to a label like “a heap,” whose literal referent is not naturally prone to disintegration, *zlepenec* is ready to convey it.

Legacy

Contrary to its current use, frequency, and popularity – it was selected as the “Word of the Year 2010”¹⁸ – the written career of *zlepenec* started as a designed geological term two centuries ago, came to be employed with negative connotations in art reviews, and entered and rose to fame in political rhetoric relatively recently, although it had a foot in the door of politicking decades earlier than occasional comments on it assume.¹⁹

Ethnic and geological digs

Central European ethnic activists strove to purge their languages of Latin terms in the 19th century, and the non-Germanic Croats, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Sorbs also of



L'Osservatore Politico, 21 July 1976, with comments by the subsequently murdered journalist on top-level alliances, which were later brought in as evidence in the criminal investigation of Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti.

¹⁷ Raimondo Catanzaro, *The Red Brigades and Left-wing Terrorism in Italy*. London, 1991.

¹⁸ Matúš Burčík, “Zlepenec je slovom roka.” *Sme*, 28 Dec. 2010.

¹⁹ For instance, Grigorij Mesežnikov of Inštitút pre verejné otázky traces its legacy only to Vladimír Mečiar in 1998. Ladislava Teichmanová, “Mesežnikov: Fico pripomína Mečiara z roku 1998.” *SITA*, 20 April 2010.

German words. The Slovaks typically adapted and adopted what Czech activists invented as replacements, with the Sorbs not far behind, the Slovenes and Poles did so only occasionally. The word *zlepenec* (spelled *slepenec*) appeared in print in Josef Jungmann's Czech–German dictionary²⁰ as the influential activist word-smith's choice or creation to replace the Latin–German geological term *Konglomerat* (spelled *Conglomerat* then)²¹ in 1838 – the English conglomerate in the sense of “rock composed of rounded fragments varying from small pebbles to large boulders in a cement.”²² Although there is no documented record of its earlier use, nor of its use in any other than the geological sense throughout the 19th century,²³ the pre-existence of *zlepenec*, and then its parallel use as a figurative, expressive word in spoken language, is theoretically possible. Expressive words are less likely to occur in the preserved Slovak and Czech texts the older they are. At the same time, its slow rise in print in the 20th century through art criticism rather than through fiction indicates that *zlepenec* was invented, entered Slovak and Czech through the standardized



Sandstone topping *zlepenec* to form the tallest European pedestal rock at Markušovce

nation-wide school geography curriculum and bifurcated into its figurative use when the designed term came to be seen as an alternative version of the structurally almost identical and well documented Czech pejorative word *slepenina*, with the same core meaning of “glued together,” used early on in art criticism,²⁴ in reference to a poor and poorly built house,²⁵ and other incongruous structures. The early 20th century saw one more attempt to employ *slepenec* as another technical – botanical – term in the phrase *slepenec prašníkovej* in the sense of the English pollinium, a coherent mass of pollen grains often with a stalk bearing an adhesive disk that clings to insects,²⁶ but it did not stick. Modern Slovak political discourse shows that that takes some effort and the user's standing.

A portrait of ČS as a young *zlepenec*

The 20th century brought a sprinkling of slowly accumulating printed occurrences of the word in art criticism, exceptionally in fiction.²⁷ Music, poems, plays, characters in them, paintings could all look like “some sort of” or “amorphous” or “mechanical” *zlepenec* to one critic or another if they did not gel into a work of art in his eyes. Its early, rare, and only obliquely political application came from the writer and well-connected commentator Karel Čapek, who regretted shortly after World War I that the name of Czechoslova-

²⁰ Josef Jakub Jungmann, *Slovník česko-německý*, Díl IV. S-U. Prague, 1838.

²¹ Which some 19th-century German activists attempted but failed to Germanize as *Kieselk-lumpen*.

²² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. An Encyclopædia Britannica Company, 2011.

²³ An early use in Slovak, spelled *slepenec* then, was by the doctor, activist, and writer Gustáv Kazimír Zechenter-Laskomerský, “Geologický opis železničnej čiar od Jalnej po Štubňu.” *Le-topis Matice slovenskej*, roč. 12, 1875.

²⁴ The occurrence in 1862 is particularly telling in its explicit comparison to a shoddily assembled physical object – Adolf Pozděna slammed a composition by Adalbert Preissler as a “*slepenina* similar to an apprentice's first work.” *Slavoj*, Vol. 1, 1862.

²⁵ František Kott, *Třetí příspěvek k česko-německému slovníku, zvláště grammaticko-fraseologickému*. Prague, 1906.

²⁶ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. An Encyclopædia Britannica Company, 2011.

²⁷ A *zlepenec* of foodstuffs. Fraňo Král, *Cesta zarúbaná*. Prague, 1934.

kia was exactly the same kind of *zlepenec* as the name of the former Austria-Hungary and as such must strike foreigners as also being a political *zlepenec*.²⁸ He wished that his new country be called Great Moravia, a name that would dazzle the world with “greatness” and appease some from the Hungarian and German minorities, as well as those Slovaks who – misguidedly according to Čapek – felt closer to the Moravians than to the Czechs. On another occasion, an activist recalled Antonín Švehla’s pre-World War I Czech Union²⁹ as a *zlepenec* that was periodically on the verge of falling apart.³⁰

The first Democrats to come unglued

Slovakia has had a slight oversupply of political groupings with the attribute *democratic* in their names since the collapse of Communism, so it is not unexpected that the first political use of *zlepenec* there, as well as its first post-Communist use, happened to label one of those parties. It may seem less expected today that neither of the two instances involved the word’s current main target, a party or alliance whose prominent member was or is Mikuláš Dzurinda. What is probably the first recorded political application of *zlepenec* in Slovakia came about before he was born. As Communists were taking hold of Czechoslovakia in 1948, and rumors abounded that the Democratic Party³¹ was facing an internal split, Vavro Šrobár, leader of the Freedom Party,³² wrote to the leader of the Communists³³ in Prague, Klement Gottwald, who planned to take advantage of it and set up an

²⁸ Karel Čapek, “Od člověka k člověku.” *Lidové noviny*, 1 Jan. 1922.

²⁹ Or Czech League, Český svaz.

³⁰ Jan Hajšman, *Mafie v rozmachu. Vzpomínky na odboj doma*. Prague, 1933.

³¹ Demokratická strana.

³² Strana slobody.

³³ Komunistická strana Československa.

allied, fifth, party in Slovakia, asking him to desist, because the Democratic Party was “a *zlepenec* that will ‘come unglued,’ fall apart”³⁴ anyway.³⁵

Karl Marx recalled

The subsequent Communist period provided hardly any opportunity for pejorative labeling of precarious political alliances. No formal opposition groups or free elections were allowed inside the country, and the media did not delve into party strategies in the democracies abroad. *Zlepenec* lived on in print as a sporadic growl of art critics, it appeared in fiction on occasion,³⁶ and in even rarer instances when democratic or historical politics was discussed and denounced in academic volumes: the National Socialists “led a counterrevolutionary *zlepenec* of reactionary forces”³⁷ in Czechoslovakia after World War II before the Communists took care of them; the governing elite was a *zlepenec* of several thousand people in contemporary Austria; pre-World War II Czechoslovakia was a convoluted³⁸ *zlepenec* indulged and shielded by the Western powers; the Habsburg Empire was described as a chance *zlepenec* of the most conflicting customs and laws, with a generic reference to Karl Marx as a source.³⁹

³⁴ Michal Barnovský, *Na ceste k monopolu moci: mocenskopolitické zápasy na Slovensku v rokoch 1945-1948*. Bratislava, 1993.

³⁵ The issue soon became moot as the Communists converted it, as well as Šrobár’s party, into one of the make-believe parties they maintained on paper during their rule.

³⁶ A [greasy/wet] *zlepenec* [lock] of hair. Peter Karvaš, *Toto pokolenie*. Bratislava, 1955.

³⁷ Viliam Plevza, *Socialistické premeny Československa*. Bratislava, 1983.

³⁸ *Násilný* in the original.

³⁹ The last reference was perhaps based on the article “Der Wiener Oktoberaufstand,” written actually by Friedrich Engels with the collaboration of Karl Marx in 1852, which said *hier in*

Who isn't a *zlepenec*?

Early post-Communist political comments applied *zlepenec* to the Vladimír Mečiar-led HZDS⁴⁰ before the 1992 elections with predictions that it would

disintegrate into antagonistic groupings and then criticized his coalition government as an ineffectual *zlepenec* after he won the



A *zlepenec* by Kyle Bean to ponder the chicken-and-egg problem. But who came first with *zlepenec*?

elections. The same claim was even made by the then Member of Parliament (MP) Vladimír Miškovský (SNS),⁴¹ who told *Sme* at the time when SNS was in Mečiar's government that the ruling coalition "has shown itself from the start to be a non-functional *zlepenec*," and hammered it in once more in the interview: "the coalition of SNS with HZDS has confirmed that the concept of a 'non-functional *zlepenec*' is justified in our [i.e., Slovak] politics."⁴² Another disgruntled SNS member and founder of the short-lived National-democratic Party,⁴³ Ľudovít Černák, said after the Jozef Moravčík⁴⁴ caretaker government took over from Mečiar that HZDS, as well as the

Österreich, diesem Mischmasch heterogener politischer Kräfte...

⁴⁰ Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko.

⁴¹ Slovak National Party, Slovenská národná strana.

⁴² Róbert Kotian, "Namiesto stavby príviesok." *Sme*, 26 Nov. 1993. After an internal rift in early 1994, Miškovský and some others split off from SNS to found the National-democratic Party, which became part of the Democratic Union a year later.

⁴³ Národno-demokratická strana.

⁴⁴ Prime Minister 16 March – 13 December 1994.

rebellious VPN⁴⁵ from 1989, had been *zlepenecs* and that he, Černák, was not considering a broad anti-HZDS opposition in order to avoid doing the same. The early post-1989 targets of the label *zlepenec* were out of power with the ascent of the Moravčík government, but the colorful word that aspired to explain complexity so easily and succinctly to its users and their readers was not a catch to be let go from journalism. The Moravčík government was appraised as a *zlepenec* almost as soon as it was formed, and Černák's new party shortly joined a coalition that would be called a *zlepenec* as well.

Entering political battleground

It took time, though, for *zlepenec* to become politicians' focused battle cry. While both Mečiar's governing coalition and Dzurinda's pre-election grouping SDK⁴⁶ were *zlepenecs* in journalists' commentaries in 1998, MP Ján Cuper (HZDS) berated the opposition MP Ján Šimko (KDH)⁴⁷ in Parliament in early 1998 that SDK wanted "to cheat the citizens of this country by creating some sort of *zlepenec*, or some so-called rainbow train, which was to bring all kinds of people to Parliament."⁴⁸ Mečiar picked up on it at a large rally in Bratislava barely a week later: "There's effort here to put together a *zlepenec* of political parties that is to be called SDK,"⁴⁹ and he and HZDS members went on repeating the

⁴⁵ Public Against Violence, Verejnost' proti násiliu.

⁴⁶ Slovak Democratic Coalition, Slovenská demokratická koalícia.

⁴⁷ Christian Democratic Movement, Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie.

⁴⁸ On 24 March 1998 as recorded in "Stenografická správa o 45. schôdzi Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky." *Národná rada Slovenskej republiky*, Bratislava, 1998.

⁴⁹ At a HZDS meeting at the Inter hala Pasienky sports arena, Bratislava, 2 April 1998, as quoted by the Slovak media.

word and statements to that effect on various occasions. Whether the choice of the word and its application was a conscious strategic party decision or a continual ad-hoc choice in search for lively language to attack the opponent in HZDS pre-election rhetoric, it succeeded to the point that journalists and commentators gradually diminished the application of *zlepenec* to domestic political groupings other than those in which Dzurinda played a key role, while they also started to bring its convenience to reports on political alliances in other countries (Czech R., Israel, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, United Kingdom – the Visegrád group was a *zlepenec* in one commentator’s view too).

From HZDS to rainbow train with love

Cuper’s reference to a “rainbow train,” potentially misleading in today’s language, is a reminder that the parties joining together in 1997 to prevent HZDS from winning elections again made their own contribution to the trajectory *zlepenec* began to follow. On the face of it, Cuper was conjuring up the title of a pop-rock hit⁵⁰ from his younger years, but it was an unambiguous reference to his opponents before the rainbow reached Slovakia as a symbol of gay activism. The core parties of the future SDK first called themselves a “blue coalition,” which implied “rightist” (the color at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Communists’ red), but when the Greens⁵¹ and Social Democrats⁵² were willing to join in, partly thanks to Dzurinda’s

⁵⁰ Often referred to as “Dúhový vlak,” the actual title of the track from the 1979 album *Opus* by the like-named band was “Little Big Train,” “Malý veľký vlak.” The word for “rainbow” came up in its lyrics.

⁵¹ Party of the Greens in Slovakia, Strana zelených na Slovensku.

⁵² Social-democratic Party of Slovakia, Sociálnodemokratická strana Slovenska.

efforts, the broadened grouping adopted the name a “rainbow coalition” to convey that they were uniting “decent” (as their supporters would often say) people of all political colors against Mečiar. The enchantment the rainbow was called on to impart to the prospect of a nation united, was equally deliberately employed to highlight readiness for diversity. The ruling coalition cannot have but noted that, by contrast, their comparable hodgepodge⁵³ of proclaimed political orientations was a *zlepenec* in the unfriendly media’s eyes, and hit back with it at those who were already telling everyone what a motley assemblage they were.

Word of the Year

The successful disparaging label is particularly apt to resurge around elections. Its frequency in the media jumped to 320 in the election year of 2010, as opposed to 42 in the previous year, which helped it to be declared the Word of the Year.⁵⁴ When that coalition government really fell apart in just over a year, *zlepenec* came back for the 2012 elections. The leader of Smer,⁵⁵ Robert Fico,

and others have been reinforcing its more-or-less established, particular political application by increasing its use in the collocation the *rightist zlepenec*.⁵⁶ Part of the success of the pigeonhol-



Climbers’ *zlepenec* – easier to hold on to, easier to break off

⁵³ Suggested by Boris Dralyuk, UCLA.

⁵⁴ Mediálny archív – Monitoring médií, Newton Media, as reported by *Sme* 28 Dec. 2010.

⁵⁵ Direction, a political party.

⁵⁶ First at a press conference in the Seat of Government building, after which the word soared in public discourse, “Vláda pravicového zlepenca

ing of the word in public discourse lies in that its old legacy and more recent political slant focused on the Dzurinda wing of Slovak politics since the late 1990s have gone largely unnoticed – to the point that someone who depends on words in his work, for instance, one of Slovakia’s most published contemporary writers and commentators, Michal Hvorecký, could surmise in 2010 that “the term was not particularly frequent and had only a weak pejorative trait before June 2010.”⁵⁷ Somewhat reminiscent of Stockholm syndrome, a paper at a 2005 conference sponsored by the Ministry of Finance lauded its head and member



A Facebook try to cleanse *zlepenec* for the rightists.

of the governing Dzurinda cabinet, Minister Ivan Mikloš, in all honesty as a capable leader who had managed “to ‘pilot’ the anti-Mečiar *zlepenec* for four years.”⁵⁸ While the word is routinely used to judge unwieldy assemblages with no implied future rupture outside of political discourse (in comments on films, models of cars, word processing, architecture, textbooks, computer games, music compilations, TV programming) and lives on in mutual accusations by the critics of Mečiar and Fico as well as by their supporters, anti-Dzurinda parties have largely succeeded in ensuring that *zlepenec* as a marker of non-functionality along with the invoked campaigning bonus of “potential disintegration” sticks to their opponents, even making them get themselves glued to it on occasion.

by atakovala PPP projekty a veľké investície.” *TASR*, 14 April 2010.

⁵⁷ Matúš Burčík, “Zlepenec je slovom roka.” *Sme* 28 Dec. 2010. — See footnote 9 and the review of its use in this article about its long-standing pejorative meaning.

⁵⁸ Jozef Chajdiak and Ján Luha, “Odhad zloženia novej vlády – predpoklad odhadov budúceho makroekonomického vývoja.” *Pohľady na ekonomiku Slovenska 2005. Konferencia pod záštitou podpredsedu vlády a ministra financií SR Ivana Mikloša*. Bratislava, 19 April 2005.

