

Slovakia's Curious Cultural War

by [Dalibor Roháč](#)

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It should not be a surprise to many that Slovakia is currently experiencing a heated controversy about the gay community's right to marry and adopt children. Many other countries have had the same debate in the past and some, like Australia, are having it at this very moment. What makes Slovakia's situation distinctive is that the proponents of gay rights have neither initiated the current debate, nor are they having the upper hand in it.

The institutionalization of gay marriage and child adoption by same-sex couples has been absent from the agendas of most political parties in Slovakia. Instead, Slovaks are witnessing a full-scale assault on the ideas of same-sex marriage and adoptions, launched by the country's conservatives in order to pre-empt possible moves to legalize them in the future. The one-sided hysteria can perhaps be explained by the fact that Slovakia – like much of the West – is increasingly tolerant of the gay community. The opponents of gay rights would not be unjustified in suspecting that the present time is the last opportunity to reverse this trend.

Protection of 'traditional family'

Earlier this year, Slovakia's opposition, the Christian Democrats, teamed up with the governing SMER party to pass a constitutional amendment meant to 'protect the family'. This was vaguely reminiscent of the infamous Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996 and overturned by the Supreme Court last year. Since September 2014, the Constitution of Slovakia has stipulated that, 'marriage is a unique bond between a man and a woman', ensuring that, 'the Slovak Republic protects marriage in all possible ways and works for its benefit.'

What makes Slovakia's situation a little odd is that its closest neighbor, the Czech Republic, has recognized civil partnerships for same-sex couples since 2006. Although the then-President Václav Klaus initially vetoed the bill, the parliamentary super-majority eventually overruled him. Over the course of the eight years since they were allowed, registered partnerships have stirred very little controversy – largely because none of the doomsday predictions about the demise of the "traditional family" made by the law's opponents have materialized. If anything, crude divorce rates in the country have fallen^[1] somewhat over the course of the past 15 years – for reasons that, more than likely, have nothing to do with gay marriage legislation.

Of course, higher religiosity rates and a strong tradition of Roman Catholicism distinguish Slovakia from the Czech Republic, but that is unlikely the sole determinant – after all, in 2009 the largely Catholic Ireland introduced civil partnerships for same-sex couples, relying on political support across the political spectrum. While Catholic bishops opposed the reform, they stopped short of mounting a concerted campaign on the scale seen in Slovakia. And in Ireland’s current debate, which is focused on the legalization of gay marriage, Irish Christians seem to be campaigning on both sides,[\[2\]](#) as illustrated by groups such as *Changing Attitude Ireland*, [\[3\]](#) which works under the umbrella of the Church of Ireland.

The fearmongering ‘Alliance for Family’

After their ‘DOMA’ success, Slovakia’s traditionalists are on the offensive. Following a petition organized by the civic campaign, *Alliance for Family*, a nationwide referendum providing answers to three popular questions has been set for February 2015: (1) whether any form of partnership, besides that of a man and a woman can be called a marriage, (2) whether a ban should be imposed on adoption of children by same-sex couples, and (3) whether there should be compulsory education in schools in the areas of “sexual behavior or euthanasia, without the explicit consent of the parents or the children themselves.”

The referendum initially included an additional item that asked whether any form of cohabitation could be given the legal attributes of marriage. Following a query by President Andrej Kiska, Slovakia’s Constitutional Court ruled that this question violated the protection of privacy and family life guaranteed by the Constitution.

Needless to say, nobody is proposing compulsory “euthanasia education” in Slovak public schools, and the success of the referendum would not change the legislative gay rights status quo. Neither that nor the weight of the evidence concerning homosexuality,[\[4\]](#) gay marriage[\[5\]](#) or same-sex adoptions[\[6\]](#) has prevented the proponents of the ‘yes’ vote from putting forward the most asinine arguments about the threat that gay unions pose to Slovakia.

According to Anton Chromík,[\[7\]](#) a lawyer and one of the leaders of the Alliance for Family, ‘homosexuals are not just asking for “rights” but they want to shut other people’s mouths. They will be making decisions for other people’s lives, careers, and that has always in history resulted in dictatorships and sometimes even mass murders.’

Some supporters of the campaign[\[8\]](#) question the evidence that the professional psychological and psychiatric associations, as well as the World Health Organization, have given when they declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in the latter half of the 20th century; and they point to allegedly successful examples of “therapy”[\[9\]](#) that can provided to gays.

Referendum is merely a distraction

One sad element of this story is that these heated debates only serve as a distraction from some very real problems of Slovakia. These include persistently high unemployment rates and stagnating standards of living in the country’s underdeveloped regions, intergenerational poverty of the Slovakia’s sizeable Roma population, rampant corruption in public procurement, a

dysfunctional judiciary, and the worrisome geopolitical shift that the country has witnessed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (when Prime Minister Robert Fico became one of the leading apologists of Russia's behavior). Instead of discussions about these matters, much of the country's elite are now trapped in an intractable cultural war.

There is, however, another side to the story – namely that Slovakia's traditionalists are just plain wrong about the alleged threat that gay marriages and adoptions pose. The increasingly tolerant attitudes towards gays around the world and the legal changes that have provided them equality under law – in the form of marriage or civil partnerships, and child adoption – have not led to a collapse of traditional marriage. As Andrew Sullivan noted in a classic essay in *The New Republic* in 1989,[\[10\]](#) '[g]ay marriage could only delegitimize straight marriage if it were a real alternative to it, and this is clearly not true.'

Neither has gay marriage in other parts of the world led to other social and moral ills. Quite the contrary, the rise in the gay community's interest in marriage is something that conservatives should welcome. After all, it is primarily a means of extending the traditional institutions of family and marriage, together with the culture they embody, to a long-isolated group of people. The rise of gay marriage could be seen as a sign of traditional, conservative, and family-friendly attitudes displacing[\[11\]](#) the traditional gay subcultures of the 1980s and the 1970s, which some people rightly or wrongly associated with promiscuity and the prevalence of HIV.

Whether it is gay marriage or adoptions of children by same-sex couples, it is difficult to imagine that Slovak traditionalists will ultimately be on the winning side of the argument. Unfortunately, in the meantime, the mean-spirited campaigning and frequent disparaging remarks about the gays and their "condition" is a very poor substitute for discussing the genuine problems of Slovak public policy. Worse yet, they are making the country a distinctly less pleasant place for many of its citizens.

[\[1\] European Commission: Crude divorce rates, selected years](#)

[\[2\] The Guardian: Ireland to hold referendum on gay marriage in May](#)

[\[3\] Changing Attitude Ireland](#)

[\[4\] American Psychiatric Association: LGBT-Sexual Orientation](#)

[\[5\] CATO Institute: Gay Marriage: Evidence from Europe?](#)

[\[6\] American Psychological Association: Sexual Orientation, Parents & Children](#)

[\[7\] SME Blog: Anton Chromík: Prehrásny nový svet](#)

[\[8\] SME Blog: Matej Mihalík: Základ výmazu homosexuality zo zoznamu porúch Americkou Asociáciou Psychiatrov](#)

[\[9\] Christopher H. Rosik: Conversion Therapy Revised: Parameters of And Rationale For Ethical Care](#)

[\[10\] New Republic: The End of Gay Culture](#)

[\[11\] New Republic: The End of Gay Culture](#)

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