

---

## Gambling Away Fraud: Tax and Speculative Governance in Slovakia

NICOLETTE MAKOVICKY

Over the past decade, ethnographers have increasingly paid attention to the ways in which practices and principles of financial speculation have been adopted in the governance of public and private resources. Those interested in matters of tax and taxation have typically associated speculation with tax evasion and fraud, paying less attention to other ways in which speculative thinking has entered the relationship between the taxpayer and the state. In this chapter, I examine the design and public reception of the Slovak National Receipt Lottery, one example of the way speculative logic has become part of governing the fiscal subject. I show how the Lottery both reflected and challenged established ideas of fiscal citizenship and redistributive justice, triggering novel anxieties about fraud, disclosure, and privacy amongst citizens and policymakers alike. It revealed a profound disconnect between the way policymakers imagined taxpayer behaviour and motivation, and citizens' own perception of themselves as morally and socially embedded subjects. Finally, I suggest that the National Receipt Lottery is an example of speculative governance: a particular way of administering public life which combines elements of audit culture, behavioural policy, and gamification to generate social goods and shape citizen subjectivities.

*A Lottery is a Taxation, Upon all the Fools in Creation;  
And Heav'n be prais'd, It is easily rais'd, Credulity's always in Fashion;  
For, Folly's a Fund, Will never lose Ground;  
While Fools are so rife in the Nation.*

Henry Fielding, *The Lottery* (1748)

There is a certain kinship between taxes and lotteries which invites us to think about them in tandem. Both taxes and lotteries invite us to think about the collection and redistribution of wealth, about self-interest and generosity, and about relations between citizens and state. Often run as state monopolies, lotteries are a way for the state authorities to regulate

gambling while capturing the proceeds as fiscal income. These proceeds are usually distributed to arts institutions, sports associations, and charitable organisations, re-allocating the funds from citizens' pockets to collective and public projects. This leads detractors to describe them as regressive 'taxes on the poor'. This kinship also invites us to think about the nature of speculative practices and their use in the governance of communal life and resources. Public authorities across the world frequently use lotteries and random draws to make decisions about the allocation of limited resources: lotteries are used to distribute everything from public housing to work permits and visas, to mandatory COVID-19 quarantine accommodation. Some policymakers have even experimented with using public lotteries to counter antisocial behaviour like speeding, and to encourage citizens to save, take care of their health, and use public transport. Lotteries thus belong to a collection of tools used by contemporary policymakers to anticipate and shape human behaviour. As such, they are an example of what I call *speculative governance*: policy instruments which produce and use particular configurations of risk, chance, and contingency to generate social goods and shape citizen subjectivities.

In this chapter, I examine the design and public reception of the Slovak National Receipt Lottery, just one example of the way speculative logic has become part of governing the fiscal subject. Scholars have conventionally conceptualised the relationship between fiscal authorities and taxpayers in terms of exchange and contract (Makovicky & Smith 2020). Speculative practices, such as the shifting of capital and credit across tax jurisdictions, have been considered the preserve of a minority of (corporate) subjects wishing to escape the fiscal state (Maurer 2005; Rawlings 2004, 2005). This association of speculative logics with tax evasion, however, has obscured other ways in which ideas and practices of contingency have entered the relationship between the taxpayer and the state. One of these has been an increasing popularity of receipt lotteries amongst governments seeking to combat the evasion of Value Added Tax (VAT). Receipt lotteries are run by local and national governments in a number of European, Asian, and Latin American countries, and are designed to encourage consumers to ask for proof of purchase by turning receipts into tickets for a publicly funded draw. Extending the process of fraud detection to everyday activities like shopping and paying for services, they turn participating consumers into voluntary tax inspectors. There already exists a lively debate amongst scholars about whether receipt lotteries advance compliance and generate fiscal dividends (Fookien, Hemmelgarn, & Herrmann 2014; Naritomi 2019), as well as

how the psychology of reward and risk influences levels of public participation (Fabbri 2015, 2016). None, however, have considered whether and how they function as technologies of governance.

I start this chapter precisely by exploring the kinship between speculative governance and other, more familiar ways of administering public life. I argue that speculative governance has emerged together with the increasing influence of the behavioural sciences on government (Thaler & Sunstein 2008), as well as the introduction of ludic elements into the administration of public and personal life ('gamification') (Woodcock & Johnson 2018). However, it also coexists and intersects with ideas and practices of calculative rationality rooted in neoliberal 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000; Shore & Wright 2015), and the shifting regimes of risk and responsibility introduced by the increasing financialisation of public and private life (Bear 2017; Bear et al. 2015). Next, I introduce the National Receipt Lottery and its discursive framing by the Slovak fiscal authorities, and citizens' responses to it. While officials viewed the Lottery as an unproblematic way of improving tax morale, some citizens saw it as running counter to everyday economic and social practices, triggering anxieties about privacy and disclosure. Others perceived the Lottery as a real or metaphorical extension of the economic practices of the country's corrupt elites, believing that a political actor or group stood to gain financially from the initiative. As such, the Lottery both reflected and challenged established ideas of fiscal citizenship and redistributive justice amongst policymakers and the public. More fundamentally, it revealed a profound disconnect between the way policymakers imagined taxpayer behaviour and motivation, and citizens' own perception of themselves as morally and socially embedded subjects.

### Of Games, Capitalism, and Speculative Governance

The concept of 'speculation' has recently gained some popularity amongst ethnographers seeking to understand the characteristics and effects of contemporary capitalism. Charting the expansion of the logics and practices of financialisation into the realms of fiscal policy, statecraft, and household finances, they have shown how speculative capitalism has become a key component in the governance of collective and individual lives. The financialisation of sovereign debts, infrastructure, and other public assets by governments across the Global North and South means the state has become an area for speculative accumulation by hedge funds, global investment banks, and other actors on the international

financial markets (Bear 2015, 2017). This has been accompanied by austerity and a radical redistribution of the risks and costs of governance between the state and the taxpayers. As public assets are passed on to private ownership, citizens have been asked to bear the costs of failing housing, infrastructure, and transport systems (Narotzky 2020; Rakopoulos 2018). They have also been encouraged to take on and manage the costs and risks of ordinary life – including education, health care, housing, and pensions – by purchasing new credit, insurance, and retirement products (Bähre 2020; Mikuš & Rodik 2021; Weiss 2019). Equating speculation with practices of capital accumulation and manipulation, ethnographers have thus shown how the financialisation of public resources and private lives has produced certain kinds of subjects, dispositions, and technologies of government.

When translated into the realm of fiscal and social policy, the logic of financial capitalism shares certain affinities with the calculative rationality of neoliberal ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000; Shore & Wright 2015). Both reflect a desire on the part of policymakers to maximise the quality and cost-efficiency of public assets, institutions, and services through their outsourcing to external (market) actors. And both produce similar social and political effects; amongst them the de-politicisation of fiscal and public policy in favour of technocratic government, and the perception of citizens as calculating subjects who should bear the risks and responsibilities of a marketised society (Bear & Mathur 2015). Yet, as Laura Bear (2020) recently argued, financialisation also requires a specific kind of speculative labour in which practices of calculation and audit are suspended in favour of an active engagement (and perhaps even production of) with uncertainty. Rather than employing formal knowledge and calculative practices to quantify and control outcomes, it is aimed at ‘making present and materializing of uncertain futures’ through their imagination and narration (Tsing 2005; Bear et al. 2015: 387). Indeed, as Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019) have argued, speculation arises precisely when anticipation and expectations appear to fail, filling the gap between that which is and that which cannot be predicted.

This suggests that the establishment of speculative finance as a tool of fiscal governance has been accompanied by a shift in the way uncertainty and contingency are approached by policymakers: rather than being perceived as something to be controlled and reduced, they are increasingly seen as something which can be measured, understood, and employed to achieve policy objectives. One way this change has manifested itself has been the introduction of games, competitions, and other ludic elements into public

policy. Touted as models which can ‘help people and organizations inhabit the complexity of future risks’ while also ‘bonding and building trust in ways that are both serious and fun’, games are increasingly being used to generate knowledge for political campaigns, development and infrastructure projects, and resource management (Hassan & Hamari 2020; Kelley & Johnston 2012; Suarez 2017). Thomas Malaby has argued that the use of games in public policy and political practice introduces elements of skill, chance, and risk into the encounter between citizens and states, and citizens and corporations, forming a technique through which private and public institutions can ‘cultivate legitimacy, domesticate and exploit creativity, and generate subjectivities’ (2012: 103). Appealing to citizens as playful, pleasure-seeking individuals, games produce bounded or semi-bounded environments which public institutions can use to educate and inform citizens, as well as canvass public opinion, generate new data and knowledge, and/or troubleshoot policy solutions.

Another, less obvious, way speculative thinking has entered policy-making has been the growing use of behavioural science to shape public policy by governments across the world. Behavioural approaches apply the insights of behavioural economics, psychology, and neuroscience to direct citizens to make pro-social choices which align with the aims of policymakers. The purpose is to create environmental clues (‘nudges’) or incentives that encourage citizens to make desirable choices without resorting to coercion or restrictions on individual choice (Oliver 2017). Typical interventions of this kind include displaying healthy food options at strategic locations in canteens and supermarkets, using smart meters and/or colour-coded billing to encourage consumers to save water and energy, and offering citizens perks for exercising (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2019). Born out of a political reluctance to regulation and a commitment to austerity, behavioural approaches share with audit culture a promise to deliver policy outcomes in a cost-effective way. However, they assume that inefficiencies arise as much from bad decision-making on the part of citizens, as they do from the faulty processes or structural inefficiencies of states. Perceiving individuals as calculative, but not necessarily *rational* actors, they identify human behaviour as an important source of uncertainty in policy-making. By manipulating the environments in which citizens make cost–benefit decisions, these approaches seek to identify behavioural biases and exploit them to generate change.

As we shall see below, the design of the Slovak National Receipt Lottery combined ludic elements with the principles of behavioural

public policy. It was driven by policymakers' belief that compliance would be best achieved by harnessing the self-interest of social actors in the service of public good, rather than by using coercion or moral appeals. Branding the Lottery a 'progressive' policy, officials saw the Lottery as an ideal tool for promoting a (neo)liberal vision of the public good which included a commitment to competitive markets, fiscal transparency, and individual choice. Policymakers, however, gave much less consideration to how citizens' reception of the Receipt Lottery might be influenced by their experiences of contingency in everyday life, or by popular ideas of political legitimacy and redistributive justice. Despite running the Lottery for nearly a decade, they did not commission any opinion polls or studies which could shed light on how public participation in the Lottery was shaped by cultural and sociological factors, such as local moral economies – that is, notions of social responsibility, equity, honesty, and enterprise – and levels of trust in government and the political process. As such, they failed to address popular misgivings about the scheme. As I show in the following sections, these misgivings ranged from the widespread feeling that it unfairly targeted small business and causes social discord, to the belief amongst some citizens that it was ultimately rigged in favour of some unknown person(s) within or behind the government.

### The Slovak National Receipt Lottery

The Slovak National Receipt Lottery was launched on 16 September 2013, accompanied by a national publicity campaign of billboards, posters, and a TV spot featuring the veteran pop singer Eva Máziková. Trained consultants were deployed to major shopping centres to guide people through the process of submitting receipts on a dedicated website ([www.narodnablockovaloteria.sk](http://www.narodnablockovaloteria.sk)), by mobile phone app, text message, or at dedicated TIPOS kiosks. In order to play, customers needed to register the date, time, value of their purchase, the tax identification number, and the electronic cash register (DKP) printed on the receipt. Successful registration gave them a stake in two competitions: a fortnightly draw for ten cash prizes ranging from €10 to €10,000, and a monthly draw for eight cash and material prizes – including a car – where one winner was picked from each of Slovakia's regions. From December 2013, players also had a third chance to win a prize on the televised game show '*Cena je správna*' ('The Price Is Right'). In the weeks following the launch, Slovakia appeared to be gripped by 'lottery

madness', with more than 7 million receipts being submitted in the first two weeks (Remeta et al. 2015). National newspapers reported that shoppers were splitting their purchases to gain more receipts, while retailers and restaurateurs collected and submitted receipts left behind by customers (Buchlaková 2013). By the end of the year, Slovak consumers had registered more than 41 million receipts with TIPOS; by September 2014, this had grown to nearly 87 million receipts (Remeta et al. 2015).

The National Receipt Lottery was born out of the Slovak fiscal authorities' need to address the country's VAT gap, which had grown from 18 per cent in 2006 to a whopping 40.3 per cent in 2012 (Gábik & Motková 2019). Facing one of the largest VAT tax gaps in Europe, the financial authorities viewed the Lottery as a cheap and convenient way to police compliance in sectors of the economy where VAT fraud was common, such as construction, retail, and the hospitality business. Behind the customer-facing side of the Lottery website, a digital system of audit was created to check all submitted tax identification numbers for irregularities. This system also performed an audit of the issuing retailer on receipts which were picked out in the national and regional prize draws, checking whether the registered transaction had been reported correctly (Remeta et al. 2015). Beyond forming a new way of detecting fraud, however, the Lottery also operated as a tool for inducing behavioural change amongst business owners and citizens. It made the VAT gap visible and pertinent to the consumer, promising that this gap could be closed through the action of individual citizens. According to a press release in 2013 published by the Ministry of Finance, the Lottery was designed to 'encourage and motivate citizens and businesses to behave normally and fairly in making and receiving payments for goods and services' and 'remind people that those businesses that do not pay taxes essentially rob those who pay taxes fairly and thus gain an unfair advantage over honest companies'.

Invoking ideas of *fairness* and *normality*, the Slovak fiscal authorities presented the Lottery as grounded in a particular kind of civic and moral reasoning. Drawing on a familiar model of taxation as an exchange between the citizen and the state, as well as a contribution to the common good, they suggested that state revenue collection was based on principles of reciprocity and solidarity. As Lotta Björklund Larsen (2018) has shown, many citizens also see equitable exchange as central to their fiscal relationship with the state and each other. Apart from a generalised understanding of tax as a 'tit-for-tat' for public services, they



expect others to pay their 'fair share' (Björklund Larsen 2018: 26–27). This perception of tax as an instrument of distributive justice is particularly prevalent in welfare states where fiscal income is understood to be collected for and spent on common societal goals. And yet, such a reading of fiscal solidarity through reciprocity is grounded as much in a liberal version of the social contract, as it is in socialist sentiment: it assumes that citizens 'consider their relationship with the state from the perspective of a "fair deal"' (Sheild Johansson 2020: 24). Indeed, the contours of this liberal social contract were visible in the way the Ministry of Finance formulated their message to the Slovak public: rather than highlighting the VAT-gap as lost income for vital public services, they drew attention to how VAT fraud distorted market conditions. According to the Ministry, solidarity was thus ensured not simply through redistribution, but through maintaining *fair competition*.

As government policy delivered in the form of a game of chance, the Lottery was thus meant to promote a particular liberal vision of the public good. Its format reflected the authorities' understanding of the nature of tax fraud, and the behaviour and motivations of taxpayers. Assuming that citizens were calculative subjects who weighed the financial benefits of successful evasion against the possible costs of detection, Slovak policymakers approached VAT evasion as a collective action problem. However, rather than attempting to increase the economic or social costs of being caught (e.g. by introducing heavier fines, or encouraging whistle-blowing), they believed that compliance could be best achieved by recalibrating the cost-benefit calculations of citizens by offering tangible awards for good citizenship. Touting the Receipt Lottery as a 'progressive tool of public policy, based on the knowledge of behavioural economics and the philosophy of liberal paternalism [*sic*]' (Gábik & Strížencová 2014: 1), they hoped that the prospect of a win would give citizens an incentive to collect and register receipts, as well as furnish them with an excuse to ask for a bill in settings where one was not usually provided (such as at open-air markets or in cafés). Policymakers thus saw the Lottery as establishing a particular 'choice architecture' (Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz 2013) which naturally encouraged good behaviour on the part of citizens without sanctioning those who choose not to participate. As one told me, participation in the Receipt Lottery was deliberately designed to be cost- and risk-free for citizens.

What officials appeared to miss, however, was that as a game of chance, the Lottery also established a specific arrangement of risk and reward – an 'architecture of contingency', to (mis)appropriate the



terminology of behavioural economists. This was true in a purely mathematical sense; in that it was based on a specific construction of probabilities for the national and regional draws. However, it was also true in a wider sense, in that the Receipt Lottery left any successful detection of fraud up to chance. Unlike an anonymous hotline or website which allowed citizens to report suspected incidents of fraud, the Lottery turned detection and audit into a matter of luck: participating (i.e. registering a receipt) did not guarantee detection (the ticket being picked and triggering an audit), let alone allow the consumers to target specific retailers for inspection. Indeed, statistical evidence collected in the first couple of years indicated players treated it less as a system for whistle-blowing, and more like any other public lottery. By 2015, the initial 'lottery madness' abated, and the number of receipts submitted fell to 40 million, and then to 35 million a year from 2016 (Najvyšší kontrolný úrad (Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic) (NKU) 2017). This fall was accompanied by a shift in the composition of players: rather than attracting incidental players from across the population, the Lottery was increasingly played by individuals or syndicates who regularly submitted large numbers of receipts. In 2016, just 5 per cent of players submitted 50 per cent of the receipts; the most dedicated player submitting 198,937 receipts and winning thirty prizes of €100 (NKU 2017).

Less than two years after the Receipt Lottery was launched, Slovak consumers were approaching it as a vehicle for speculative behaviour. This development caused disappointment among policymakers and analysts who lamented that players were 'attracted to the lottery due to gambling motives and the misperception of probabilities' (Fooker, Hemmelgarn, & Herrmann 2014: 15). The authorities reacted to these developments by changing the frequency and structure of the Lottery draws, changing what they perceived to be the incentive structure ('choice architecture') of the game. They did not, however, undertake any studies of popular opinion or ask citizens how they felt about the scheme. In the next section, I explore the attitudes of a selection of Slovak citizens towards the Receipt Lottery. I show that while some of them echoed the language and concerns of policymakers, a significant number of them perceived the scheme as socially divisive. Putting greater emphasis on the possible social consequences of demanding receipts from retailers, they worried that new demands for transparency would push against existing moral and social expectations. Indeed, the very format of the Lottery itself – with its introduction of contingency into the process of detecting fraud – appeared to exacerbate (rather than ameliorate) their misgivings.

Understanding why requires examining how cultural ideas of chance and luck shaped their experience of the scheme.

### The Lottery as a Regime of Disclosure

I have worked my entire life. They took what belonged to the state from my salary, without asking me if I wanted it. Why should an entrepreneur have benefits with regards to paying taxes? He does not print receipts, he has a cash register which is not registered with the tax authorities, he tinkers with the software so that he does not need to pay tax. I am not jealous, but then people should not be surprised when he was not able to afford salt water and today, he rides around in a BMW and has a luxury villa, expensive holidays and so on. We are all to blame for the fact taxes are escaping elsewhere, we are all looking for cheaper deals, paying in cash etc.

This was how Zuzana, a middle-aged teacher from Bratislava, responded when I asked her whether she thought the Receipt Lottery was a good idea. Zuzana was typical of one particular type of Lottery player, namely a citizen who was spurred on to submit a few receipts by the initial excitement surrounding the scheme. She approved of the Lottery and its key objectives, but she told me she had only played it once or twice over the first year it had run. At the time she had had two small children, and she had not been able to find the time nor the patience to collect receipts and register them online. One person who did actively collect and register receipts was Andrej, a 35-year-old information technology officer from Bratislava. He belonged to the tribe of ‘professional’ players who had incorporated the Lottery into their everyday routine. Andrej regularly played the Lottery since its inception in 2013 and used to collect and register around four receipts a day, some of them from his family and friends – although he assured me that while he considered playing the Lottery his ‘hobby’, he had never been obsessed enough to be going around ‘picking up receipts from the ground’. Despite his enthusiasm, however, Andrej was somewhat unsure of whether he thought the scheme was a genuine success: ‘My personal opinion is that this will not solve the problems we have with collecting taxes. However, it also has the effect that I ask for receipts, especially in shops and services where it is not common, so I at least feel that it fulfils its purpose.’

Despite their different levels of engagement, Zuzana and Andrej responded to the Receipt Lottery like model citizens. They exhibited the kind of moral reasoning the fiscal authorities expected of responsible

taxpayers. Zuzana's concern about the fraudulent practices of some entrepreneurs echoed the Ministry of Finance's focus on compliance and fair competition, as did her acceptance that the Slovak consumer bore at least some responsibility for rectifying the situation. Despite his misgivings about the efficacy of the Lottery, Andrej likewise recognised its essential function as a citizen-driven audit scheme, and his own role. However, not all my respondents were ready to embrace this new role as citizen tax inspector. A number of people told me that they refused to get involved in the Lottery precisely because they felt uncomfortable asking for a receipt. Peter, an accountant in his mid-fifties based in the town of Trnava, told me he would be 'too embarrassed' to ask for a receipt in a bar or restaurant if it had not been supplied, as it would signal his distrust of the patron. His misgivings were echoed by Dagmar, a retired maths teacher from Banská Bystrica, Central Slovakia. For years, she had bought sheep's cheese from a shepherd who grazed his flock in the hills surrounding the city. She had never asked him for a receipt, and certainly had no plans to start now: 'He brings me the cheese right here, to my own door and I pay him what he asks, in cash. I would never ask him for a receipt. I trust him to do the right thing.'

Researching *svart arbete* (informal work) in Sweden, Lotta Björklund Larsen notes that people buying goods and services off the books often explain their choice to evade tax using 'two sets of reasoning: economic and habitual' (2013: 420). In their efforts to make illegal transactions at least *morally* licit, they point out that such work is done to 'help each other out' and is often simpler, cheaper, and more reliable than a service provided by a registered professional. Combining reciprocal help and economic rationality, *svart arbete* is thus a 'good deal' in both senses: it not only favours the buyer and seller economically, but reaffirms the primacy of human relations over market transactions. The reluctance of Peter and Dagmar to ensure the formalisation of their transactions by demanding a receipt from patrons and retailers can be seen as their own pursuit of such affirmation of social mutuality. As anthropologist Juraj Buzalka (2020) has recently remarked, relaxed attitudes to the formal economy are not only widespread in contemporary Slovakia, but should be seen as part of everyday economic practices and rituals which are socially and historically embedded in kinship and community structures. Relationships which blend mutuality and self-interest – like that of Dagmar and the shepherd – are not felt to be problematic or paradoxical, but are rather seen as a natural part of life when everyday needs and problems are solved by turning to friends, relatives, and/or acquaintances

for help (Buzalka 2020; Henig & Makovicky 2017). As in the case of *svart arbete*, such arrangements are not merely a locus of morally positive relations, but were productive of interpersonal trust.

Peter and Dagmar's reluctance to participate in the Receipt Lottery indicates that they did not want to test the limits of this trust. Indeed, some of my respondents reacted even more forcefully to the notion that they should take on the role of citizen tax inspector. Slavo, a sixty-year-old gallery owner from Bratislava, became quite agitated when we talked about the scheme: 'I am not going to inform on anyone. If our genial government of "experts" did not suffocate tradesmen and small entrepreneurs with high levies and did not waste money and thus actually force them into doing all kinds of bullshit, even the state's coffers would be filled up faster.' He railed against the fiscal mismanagement of the Slovak state, and the over-regulated business environment which forced small business owners like himself to take an unorthodox approach to reporting transactions and profit (although he claimed never to have engaged in any such practices himself). Yet, more striking was his reference to playing the Lottery as a kind of 'informing', a word pregnant with social and political meaning in a country which had once been part of the communist Eastern Bloc. Comparing playing the Receipt Lottery to collaboration with the communist-era secret services, Slavo portrayed the scheme not as a means for creating greater transparency, but rather as what Steven Sampson has recently called a 'regime of disclosure' – that is, 'a set of practices which formally or informally regulate the escape knowledge' through the prevention, encouragement, reward, or punishment of disclosure (2019: 777).

For many of my respondents, in short, the Receipt Lottery triggered anxieties about social solidarity, trust, and individual privacy. Rather than perceiving it as a cost- and risk-free competition, Peter, Dagmar, and Slavo saw it as causing social friction between consumers and small business owners, and as pitting citizens against each other. Their perception of the Lottery as a regime of disclosure, however, indicated that they saw it not only as productive of social distrust, but as a problem of what normative philosophers call 'moral luck' (Williams 1981). According to Western ideas of possessive individualism, moral agency is the property of rational agents and guaranteed by their 'unconditioned will' (Williams 1981: 35). People therefore cannot – or should not – be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control (Nagel 1979: 58). And yet, as Mark Mosko has pointed out, even in societies where 'subjects are ordinarily expected to be the agents,

sources, or causes of their success (or failures)', people frequently experience that they are judged for actions and consequences outside of their control (2012: 34). Such 'moral luck' plays a key role in the working out of the distribution of responsibility in society, determining what is seen as within or beyond the control of an individual and what they can be held responsible for (Kuan 2017; Mattingly 2014). Despite the fact that the Receipt Lottery randomised the odds of catching out crooked retailers, some of my respondents clearly felt that playing it implicated them in the possible misfortune of others.

The public perception of the Receipt Lottery as a problem of 'moral luck', rather than as a fun, risk-free competition, illustrates the gap between policymakers' perception of citizens as calculative agents, and their own experience of themselves as morally and socially embedded subjects. It also shows the degree to which the introduction of chance into fiscal policy appeared to disturb popular perceptions of fortune and responsibility. Indeed, while policymakers appeared to think the element of chance afforded by the Lottery would render it more attractive to citizens, it appeared instead to challenge them to look for alternative causalities beyond mere luck. Accustomed to periodic revelations about large-scale VAT fraud and complex, illegal money-making schemes by prominent economic and political figures, many regarded the Lottery with suspicion. Rather than celebrating its 'progressive' nature, they compared it to the Ponzi and pyramid schemes and questionable practices of speculation which had accompanied post-communist privatisation. Against the backdrop of widespread corruption and fraud involving prominent politicians and businessmen, they wondered whether winning the Receipt Lottery was a matter of luck, or whether the scheme was in some way rigged in favour of the state (or some shady figure within the state apparatus). Indeed, some believed that there was simply no such thing as luck when it came to the accumulation and (re)distribution of wealth, and that the introduction of chance into fiscal policy was not morally or socially inconsequential.

### Lotteries and Speculative Post-socialisms

Existing anthropological studies of VAT reforms, including new receipt lotteries and practices of audit, have shown that citizens perceive such interventions as modes of discipline and surveillance instituted by a predatory state (Schueth 2012). New forms of audit and digitalisation are seen as politically inflected technologies, which – when combined

with measures such as unannounced inspections and pre-emptive taxation – may breed distrust towards the state amongst taxpayers (Björklund Larsen et al. 2012; Smith 2020). My respondents, however, seemed more prone to see the Lottery as an insult to their intelligence. A common trope was that it was a waste of time and money for both the consumers and the Slovak state, with people wondering whether the Receipt Lottery generated enough tax income to cover the cost of the administration and prizes. Others were certain that the Lottery must be a mechanism for either defrauding the state or taking advantage of the gullibility of the general public. Some pointed out that the scheme did nothing to stop large-scale tax avoidance by multinational companies. As Peter, the accountant from Tranava, pithily remarked, ‘What is allowed for the master is not allowed for the ox (*čo je dovoľené pánovi, nie je dovoľené volovi*). We may find small defaulters, but how many millions will the state lose by failing to force large taxpayers to repay their debt to the state fairly?’

Like many other citizens in Slovakia, and beyond, Peter was frustrated by the power of big businesses to dictate fiscal policy and escape their tax liabilities. In the decades following the collapse of communist rule, Slovakia staked its economic and industrial recovery on attracting investment from multinational corporations. Offering favourable tax provisions to major international industrial players, politicians sometimes subordinated the needs of domestic firms and populations to that of foreign capital (Pavlínek 2016). It was also a reference to the widespread corruption and tax fraud perpetrated by Slovak actors with the collusion of the fiscal authorities. Our conversation happened in the wake of the trial (and acquittal) of the businessman Marian Kočner for the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, and his subsequent jailing on a separate charge of forgery and tax evasion. The trials laid bare not only Kočner’s business practices – which included submitting fraudulent VAT claims on repeated sales of his properties to his own shell companies – but the fact he had evaded prosecution by using blackmail and bribes to gain influence over prosecutors, judges, and politicians (Holcová & Soltesz 2020). The case laid bare the corrupt economic practices of the Slovak oligarchy, and their successful capture of political and judicial institutions. Against this background of such widespread malfeasance, the Receipt Lottery appeared to be little more than a fig leaf covering up the plunder of state assets by elites. As Štefan, an electrician, told me, ‘If the author of the lottery and his companions did not steal everything in this Banana Republic (*“bananistan”*), we would not need the Lottery.’

Indeed, the more cynical amongst my respondents told me they felt like they were living inside a giant Ponzi scheme run by Slovakia's elites – a scheme in which the Receipt Lottery was merely the very bottom of a far more lucrative pyramid. Declaring that the Lottery must serve the special interests of some unknown person or group, two of my respondents referred to it as a kind of 'tunnelling' (*tunelovanie*), the Slovak word for asset stripping. In doing so, they drew a parallel between the Receipt Lottery and questionable practices of investment and privatisation which emerged in the 1990s, including the proliferation of Ponzi and pyramid schemes promising citizens high returns on their investments. As Katherine Verdery has argued, such schemes introduced ordinary citizens to the speculative economic practices of capitalism (1995: 4). During state socialism, economic speculation was ideologically and practically associated with the informal economy, the low-inflation and non-market conditions of the command economy rendering any arbitrage on future value impossible. Ponzi and pyramid schemes extended such socialist-era understandings of capitalism as speculative commerce into new forms of investment and credit, mediating post-socialist processes of wealth creation through privatisation and financialisation (Musaraj 2011, 2019: 109). As such, they were a particular feature of the way neoliberal processes of global financial circulation and rapid accumulation developed in the context of post-socialist transition (Musaraj 2011, 2019). Drawing analogies between the Receipt Lottery and practices of 'tunnelling', my interlocutors thus presented an alternative reading of the scheme as a sophisticated mechanism for the extraction and conversion of public (and the public's) assets into private wealth.

Placing the Lottery within the context of the speculative economies of post-socialism and contemporary practices of state capture, Peter, Jaro, and others appeared to ascribe to a particularly Manichean view of Slovak society. As is illustrated by Peter's reference to the Slovak proverb about the master (*pán*) and the oxen (*vôl*), they shared the conviction that such pathways to wealth were not available to ordinary people, but the preserve of unscrupulous businessmen and politicians. Like the proverbial ox, the role of honest, hardworking citizens was to be exploited – perhaps because they were not clever enough to avoid it (*vôl* is a common Slovak expression for 'idiot'). This worldview coloured their reading of the Lottery, convincing them that it must be rigged in favour of the fiscal authorities, or even a group or person behind the policy who stood to gain financially from it. This impression was strengthened by the impression that the Receipt Lottery was a game of



chance without risk for the consumer. While the Slovak authorities were keen to assure citizens that they had nothing to lose by playing the Lottery, they also inadvertently suggested that by controlling risk, they were also controlling chance. As Iveta, a feisty pensioner in her late seventies, told me: ‘No I did not participate in the Receipt Lottery, my mother told me when I was child that “no one will give you anything for free”. The only thing anyone will give you for free is the flu, or perhaps a slap if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time!’

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to unpack the cultural and ideological logics underpinning the design and reception of the Slovak National Receipt Lottery, exploring the ways in which it introduced contingency into the practice of governing the fiscal subject. Over the past decade, ethnographers have increasingly paid attention to the ways in which practices and principles of financial speculation have been adopted in the governance of public and private resources. Those interested in matters of tax and taxation have typically associated speculation with tax evasion and fraud, paying less attention to other ways in which speculative thinking has entered the relationship between the taxpayer and the state. Formulating the concept of speculative governance, I proposed that the Receipt Lottery could be seen as an example of *speculative governance*: a particular way of administering public life which combines elements of audit culture, behavioural policy, and gamification. Policies like the Lottery are speculative partly because they are experimental, unorthodox, and future oriented, and seek to anticipate and shape human behaviour and environments (rather than simply control them). They are also speculative in a stricter sense: harnessing the goodwill, creativity, labour, and data of citizens for the purposes of policy-making, using a compelling mixture of incentives and risks to engage citizens while achieving predefined policy goals. In broadening the term speculation beyond the arena of finance, I want to ask questions about how contingency is understood, embraced, and employed in policy. What principles of government and beliefs about human agency is speculative policy-making built on? What sorts of citizen subjects and social goods is it meant to produce?

In the case of the Receipt Lottery, speculative policy-making was used by the Slovak fiscal authorities to promote a particular vision of the public good which included fiscal transparency, competitive markets,

and self-disciplined citizens. Faced with one of Europe's widest VAT gaps, they imagined it to be an inventive tool for educating the public on the virtue of paying one's taxes, as well as for policing the behaviour of small businesses in problem sectors. In many ways, the choice of the Lottery format was a pragmatic one: running the Lottery was less expensive than intensifying existing audit and detection efforts, less punitive than introducing new fines, and less morally controversial than a straightforward whistle-blowing programme.

However, it also revealed much about their way in which they understood the taxpayer and sought to influence their behaviour. Assuming that citizens were calculative subjects who approached tax evasion – and participation in any kind of anti-fraud scheme – with a cost-benefit mindset, the fiscal authorities eschewed appeals to morality in favour of appeals to their self-interest. Representing the Lottery as an ostensibly cost- and risk-free competition which rewarded lucky citizens and (at the same time) detected and punished VAT evasion, they believed they could incentivise Slovaks into good citizenship. Indeed, by extending the process of detection and regulation to everyday practices such as shopping, the authorities transferred part of the responsibility for fighting tax evasion to the public, turning citizens into voluntary tax inspectors.

Speaking to men and women across the country, I found that many of the policymakers' assumptions did not hold. While there were many who were positive about the Receipt Lottery, or at least indifferent to its attractions, others baulked at the prospect of being turned into citizen tax inspectors. These people were reluctant to demand a receipt from producers and retailers with whom they shared personal relations, preferring to keep transactions opaque in favour of keeping a sense of interpersonal trust. Perceiving the Lottery as a regime of disclosure, they were uncomfortable with the implication that their luck in winning might bring misfortune on another. Most strikingly, they associated the Lottery less with the range of other, state-sanctioned gambles and games of chance run by TIPOS, but rather with the corruption and fraud which had been a permanent feature of political and economic life since the 1990s. In a country where tax fraud by political and economic elites is a permanent part of the governance landscape, the Lottery triggered associations with the pyramid schemes and '*tunnelling*' of early post-socialism, as well as contemporary state capture. For those who had misgivings about the scheme, the role of chance was either discounted or even dismissed outright in the belief that it was rigged. As in Fielding's poem, the most cynical of my respondents saw the Lottery as 'a Taxation,

Upon the Fools of Creation' and their fellow citizens as the oxen (*vôl*) from the Slovak proverb – honest, hardworking, but also gullible victims of chance.

### References

- Bähre, E. (2020). *Ironies of Solidarity: Insurance and Financialization of Kinship in South Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Bear, L. (2011). Making a river of gold: Speculative state planning, informality, and neoliberal governance on the Hooghly. *Focaal*, 61, 46–60.
- (2015). *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- (2017). 'Alternatives' to austerity: A critique of financialized infrastructure in India and beyond. *Anthropology Today*, 33(5), 3–7.
- (2020). Speculation: A political economy of technologies of imagination. *Economy and Society*, 40(1), 1–15.
- Bear, L., Birla, R., & Puri, S. (2015). Speculation: Futures and capitalism in India. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 35(3), 387–391.
- Bear, L., & Mathur, N. (2015). Introduction remaking the public good: A new anthropology of bureaucracy. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 33(1), 18–34.
- Björklund Larsen, L. (2013). The making of a 'good deal': Dealing with conflicting and complementary values when getting the car repaired informally in Sweden. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 6(4), 419–433.
- (2017). Mind the (tax) gap: An ethnography of a number. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 10(5), 419–433.
- (2018). *A Fair Share of Tax: A Fiscal Anthropology of Contemporary Sweden*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Björklund Larsen, L., Arakelyan, R., Gogsadze, T., Katsadze, M., Skhirtladze, S., & Muench, N. (2012). The Georgian Tax Lottery of 2012: A Multi-Methodological Assessment. Working Papers 009–19, JEL, International School of Economics at TSU, Tbilisi.
- Bryant, R., & Knight, D. (2019). *The Anthropology of the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buchlaková, L. (2013). *Pre bločkovú lotériu ľudia delia nákupy*, Pravda, 2 September. <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/ludia/clanok/291712-pre-block-ovu-loteriu-ludia-delia-nakupy/>. Last accessed 25 February 2021.
- Buzalka, J. (2020). *The Cultural Economy of Protest in Post-socialist European Union: Village Fascists and Their Rivals*. London: Routledge.
- Fabbri, M. (2015). Shaping tax norms through lotteries. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 44, 8–15.

- Fabbri, M., & Wilks, D. C. (2016). Tax lotteries: The crowding-out of tax morale and long-run welfare effects. *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues*, 19(2), 26–38.
- Fooken, J., Hemmelgarn, T., & Herrmann, B. (2014). *Improving VAT Compliance – Random Awards for Tax Compliance*. European Commission Taxation Papers no. 51. ISSN 1725–7565.
- Gábik, R., & Motková, M. (2019). *Daňová medzera na DPH (The VAT Tax Gap)*. Manuál. Inštitútu finančnej politiky (IFP).
- Gábik, R., & Strížencová, K. (2014). *Bločková lotéria si na DPH zarobí štvornásobne. Komentár (The Receipt Lottery will earn four times as much in VAT)*. Slovakia: Inštitút Finančnej Politiky.
- Hassan, L. (2017). Governments should play games: Towards a framework for the gamification of civic engagement. *Platforms, Simulation & Gaming*, 48(2), 249–267.
- Hassan, L., & Hamari, J. (2020). Gameful civic engagement: A review of the literature on gamification of e-participation. *Government Information Quarterly*, 37(3), 101461.
- Henig, D., & Makovicky, N. (2017). *Economies of Favour after Socialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holcová, P., & Soltész, A. (2020). Kocner's world. 21 February. [www.occrp.org/en/a-journalists-undying-legacy/kocners-world](http://www.occrp.org/en/a-journalists-undying-legacy/kocners-world). Last accessed 25 February 2021.
- Gatt, L., & Owen, O. (2018). Direct taxation and state-society relations in Lagos, Nigeria. *Development and Change*, 49(5), 1195–1222.
- Guyer, J. I. (1992). Small change: Individual farm work and collective life in a Western Nigerian Savanna Town, 1969–88. *Africa*, 62(4), 465–489.
- Ho, K. (2009). *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kelley, T., & Johnston, E. (2012). Discovering the appropriate role of serious games in the design of open governance platforms. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 36(4), 504–554.
- Kuan, T. (2017). The problem of moral luck, anthropologically speaking. *Anthropological Theory*, 17(1), 30–59.
- Lee, S. C. (2020). Magical capitalism, gambler subjects: South Korea's bitcoin investment frenzy. *Cultural Studies* (online only). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1788620>
- Makovicky, N., & Smith, R. (2020). Beyond the social contract: An anthropology of tax. *Social Analysis*, 64(2), 1–154.
- Malaby, T. (2010). *Gambling Life: Dealing in Contingency in a Greek City*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- (2012). Our present misfortune games and the post-bureaucratic colonization of contingency. *Social Analysis*, 56(2), 103–116.

- Mattingly, C. (2014). *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Maurer, B. (2005). Due diligence and 'reasonable man,' offshore. *Cultural Anthropology*, 20(4), 474–505.
- Mikuš, M., & Rodik, P. (2021). *Households and Financialization in Europe. Mapping Variegated Patterns in Semi-Peripheries*. London: Routledge.
- Ministry of Finance. (2013). Národná bločková lotéria sa začína! (The National Block Lottery is about to start!) (Press release). [www.mfsr.sk/sk/media/tlacove-spravy/narodna-blockova-loteria-zacina.html](http://www.mfsr.sk/sk/media/tlacove-spravy/narodna-blockova-loteria-zacina.html). Last accessed 27 February 2024.
- Miyazaki, H. (2013). *Arbitraging Japan: Dreams of Capitalism at the End of Finance*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Mosko, M. (2012). Laki charms: 'Luck' and personal agency in North Mekeo social change. *Social Analysis*, 56(2), 19–38.
- Musaraj, S. (2011). Tales from Albarado: The materiality of pyramid schemes in postsocialist Albania. *Cultural Anthropology*, 26(1), 84–110.
- (2019). The magic of pyramid firms: Political cosmologies, credibility and collapsed finance. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 84(2), 179–200.
- Nagel, T. (1979). *Mortal Questions*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Naritomi, J. (2019). Consumers as tax auditors. *American Economic Review*, 109(9), 3031–72.
- Narotzky, S. (2020). *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. London: Pluto Press.
- NKU. (2017). *Závěrečná správa. Účinnosť opatrení politiky boja s podvodmi na DPH (Final Report. Effectiveness of policy measures to combat VAT fraud)*. Bratislava: Najvyšší kontrolný úrad SR.
- Novýsedlák, V., & Palkovičová, J. (2012). *The estimate of the value added tax revenue loss*. Economic Analysis 25. Institute for Financial Policy, The Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic.
- Nunez, J. (2017). A clinical economy of speculation: Financial trading and gambling disorder in Spain. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(2), 269–93.
- OECD. (2019). *Tools and Ethics for Applied Behavioural Insights: The BASIC Toolkit*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- (2020). *Revenue Statistics 2020 – The Slovak Republic*. Paris: Centre for Tax Policy and Administration.
- Oliver, A. (2017). *The Origins of Behavioural Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pavlínek, P. (2016). Whose success? The state–foreign capital nexus and the development of the automotive industry in Slovakia. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 23(4), 571–593.
- Rakopoulos, T. (2018). *From Clans to Co-ops: Confiscated Mafia Land in Sicily*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

- Rawlings, G. (2004). Re-regulating offshore finance? *Geography Compass*, 2(1), 155–175.
- (2005). Mobile people, mobile capital and tax neutrality: Sustaining a market for Offshore Finance Centres. *Accounting Forum*, 29(3), 289–310.
- Remeta, J., Perret, S., Jareš, M., & Brys, B. (2015). *Moving Beyond the Flat Tax – Tax Policy Reform in the Slovak Republic*. OECD Taxation Working Papers, No. 22. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Sampson, S. (2019). Citizen duty or Stasi society? Whistleblowing and disclosure regimes in organizations and communities. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 19, 1–24.
- Schonleitner, G. (2009). Between liberal and participatory democracy: Tensions and dilemmas of leftist politics in Brazil. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38(1), 35–63.
- Schueth, S. (2012). Apparatus of capture: Fiscal state formation in the republic of Georgia. *Political Geography*, 31(3), 133–143.
- Sheild Johansson, M. (2020). Taxes for independence: Rejecting a fiscal model of reciprocity in peri-urban Bolivia. *Social Analysis*, 64(2), 18–37.
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015). Governing by numbers: audit culture, rankings and the new world order. *Social Anthropology/Antropologie Sociale*, 23(1), 22–28.
- Smith, R. (2020). Contesting the social contract: Tax reform and economic governance in Istria, Croatia. *Social Analysis*, 64(2), 79–100.
- Šrámková, L., & Melioris, L. (2015). *Much Ado about Nothing? Yes and No: VAT Pass-through to Consumer Prices*. Economic analysis – Policy paper 32. Institute for Financial Policy (IFP).
- Strathern, M. (2000). *Audit Cultures Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. London: Routledge.
- Suarez, P. (2017). Rethinking the future of governance through games. Global Challenges Foundation. <https://medium.com/@ChallengesFnd/rethinking-the-future-of-governance-through-games-1987c85fee6b>. Last accessed 25 February 2021.
- Sunstein, C., & Thaler, R. (2003). Libertarian paternalism is not an oxymoron. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 70(4), 1159–1202.
- Thaler, R., & Sunstein, C. (2008). *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Thaler, R., Sunstein, C., & Balz, J. (2013). Choice architecture. In E. Shafir, ed., *The Behavioral Foundations of Public Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tsing, A. (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Verdery, K. (1995). 'Caritas': And the reconceptualization of money in Romania. *Anthropology Today*, 11(1), 3–7.

- Weiss, H. (2019). *We Have Never Been Middle Class: How Social Mobility Misleads Us*. London: Verso Books.
- Wilks, D., Cruz, J., & Sousa, P. (2019) 'Please give me an invoice': VAT evasion and the Portuguese tax lottery. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 39(5/6), 412–426.
- Williams, B. (1981). *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woodcock, J., & Johnson, M. (2018). Gamification: What it is, and how to fight it. *The Sociological Review*, 66(3), 542–558.