Variability of snow line elevation, snow cover area and depletion in the main Slovak basins in winters 2001–2014

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Abstract: Spatial and temporal variability of snow line (SL) elevation, snow cover area (SCA) and depletion (SCD) in winters 2001–2014 is investigated in ten main Slovak river basins (the Western Carpathians). Daily satellite snow cover maps from MODIS Terra (MOD10A1, V005) and Aqua (MYD10A1, V005) with resolution 500 m are used.

The results indicate three groups of basins with similar variability in the SL elevation. The first includes basins with maximum elevations above 1500 m a.s.l. (Poprad, Upper Váh, Hron, Hornád). Winter median SL is equal or close to minimum basin elevation in snow rich winters in these basins. Even in snow poor winters is SL close to the basin mean. Second group consists of mid-altitude basins with maximum elevation around 1000 m a.s.l. (Slaná, Ipeľ, Nitra, Bodrog). Median SL varies between 150 and 550 m a.s.l. in January and February, which represents approximately 40–80% snow coverage. Median SL is near the maximum basin elevation during the snow poor winters. This means that basins are in such winters snow free approximately 50% of days in January and February. The third group includes the Rudava/Myjava and Lower Váh/Danube. These basins have their maximum altitude less than 700 m a.s.l. and only a small part of these basins is covered with snow even during the snow rich winters.

The evaluation of SCA shows that snow cover typically starts in December and last to February. In the highest basins (Poprad, Upper Váh), the snow season sometimes tends to start earlier (November) and lasts to March/April. The median of SCA is, however, less than 10% in these months. The median SCA of entire winter season is above 70% in the highest basins (Poprad, Upper Váh, Hron), ranges between 30–60% in the mid-altitude basins (Hornád, Slaná, Ipeľ, Nitra, Bodrog) and is less than 1% in the Myjava/Rudava and Lower Váh/Danube basins. However, there is a considerable variability in seasonal coverage between the years. Our results indicate that there is no significant trend in mean SCA in the period 2001–2014, but periods with larger and smaller SCA exist. Winters in the period 2002–2006 have noticeably larger mean SCA than those in the period 2007–2012.

Snow depletion curves (SDC) do not have a simple evolution in most winters. The snowmelt tends to start between early February and the end of March. The snowmelt lasts between 8 and 15 days on average in lowland and high mountain basins, respectively. Interestingly, the variability in SDC between the winters is much larger than between the basins.

Keywords: MODIS; Snow line; Snow cover; Snow depletion curves; Slovakia.

INTRODUCTION

Seasonality of river discharge is in many parts of the world significantly affected by snowmelt. This is not an attribute of only high latitude northern or mountain basins. For example, snowmelt influences runoff and flood regime in the Danube River basin (central Europe) also at gauging stations which are far from the mountains (e.g. Holko et al., 2011; Parajka et al., 2010). Snow cover is another important indicator of the climatic character of a winter. Thus, analysis of spatial and temporal variability of snow cover at catchment scale helps to evaluate changes in flood regimes (Hall et al., 2014), to forecast snowmelt runoff in the spring period (e.g. Nester et al., 2012) and is an important indicator for attributing increasing air temperature in climatic studies (Pepin et al., 2015). Traditionally, the snow cover climatology is based on snow depth observations at climate stations (Šamaj and Valovič, 1988; Šamaj et al., 1991; Lapin et al., 2007). Such estimation has the advantage of relatively long records, but the limitation is rather sparse observation network, particularly in the mountains.

Spatial patterns of snow cover can be more easily derived from remote sensing observations. One of the most commonly used is the MOderate-resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) operating on satellites Aqua and Terra. MODIS data has been successfully applied in snowmelt modeling (Day, 2013; Georgievsky, 2009; Li and Wiliams, 2008; Ma et al., 2013; Tekeli et al., 2005), calibration of distributed snow models (Franz and Karsten, 2013; He et al., 2014; Parajka and Blöschl, 2008a) or climatological research of snow cover variations (Foppa and Seiz, 2012; Gascoin et al., 2015; Mishra et al., 2013; Liang et al. 2008; Tang et al. 2013; Wang and Xie, 2009). The advantage of using MODIS data is its high spatial and temporal resolution, the limitation is larger cloud coverage, particularly in mountains, which limits snow cover detection (Parajka et al., 2012). There have been different methods proposed and tested for cloud reduction in the past (see e.g. summary in Parajka and Blöschl, 2012). One of the most efficient approaches for the mountains is the snow line approach (Parajka et al., 2010). Krajčí et al. (2014) proposed and evaluated a regional snow line elevation method (RSLE) in the upper Váh basin and reported an overall accuracy between 73% and 92%. The average accuracy in the forest exceeded 90% for the period January to March.
The main objective of this study is to evaluate spatial and temporal variability of snow cover characteristics determined by the RSLE method in the main Slovak river basins. MODIS snow products data are available since spring 2000. Despite their potential and numerous applications in snow research, the regional assessment of snow cover area in different basins is still rare. This article strives to fill the gap and analyze variability of snow line elevation (SL), snow cover area (SCA) and snow depletion curves (SDC) in the main Slovak basins in period 2000–2014. It is for the first time that the MODIS snow cover patterns are analyzed for the main Slovak basins in which snow cover has extremely high spatial and temporal variability.

**METHODS**

Regional snow line elevation (SL) is determined from the MODIS satellite data by the RSLE methodology (Krajčí et al., 2014). The cornerstone of the approach is to find an elevation for which the sum of snow covered pixels below (PS) and land pixels above the snow line (PL) is minimized (Fig. 1).

The entire area above and below the snow line (ASL) is considered as snow covered and snow free, respectively. The relative snow covered area of a basin (SCA in %) is calculated as:

$$\text{SCA} = \frac{A_{\text{ASL}}}{A_T} \times 100$$  (1)

where $A_{\text{ASL}}$ represents the area above the SL and $A_T$ is total basin area.

The snow covered area is used to calculate the snow cover depletion curves (SDC). The SDC relates the areal extent of the snow cover (SCA) to elapsed time (Jain, 2011). The SDC represents period of snow cover depletion from maximum basin SCA to complete melt of snow cover in particular basin. The decrease of snow covered area during the snowmelt period represents a link between snow climatology and hydrology and can be used for parametrization of snowmelt in large scale models (Liston, 1999) or operational snowmelt runoff forecasting (Seidel and Martinec, 2004). Large cloud coverage does not allow us to estimate SL and SCA for each day. Therefore, we use linear interpolation to calculate snow line elevation for days when cloud coverage exceeds 70%. The selection of this threshold is based on previous investigations of Krajčí et al. (2014). Interpolated SL values so allow consistent calculation of snow cover characteristics for all basins. An example of MODIS snow cover maps and interpolated SL values for the Váh River basin to Liptovský Mikuláš basin is presented in Fig. 1. The left, middle and right map in the upper panel shows the estimated and interpolated snow line elevation in March 30, April 7 and April 25, respectively. Figure 1 indicates that when applying 70% threshold then SL need to be interpolated for 55% of days in winter 2006. This frequency is lower for larger basins and decrease with decreasing mean basin elevation. For selected Slovak basins it varies on average between 42% in Poprad to 35% in Lower Váh/Danube basin.

The seasonal and inter-annual variability of SL and SCA characteristics is described by selected percentiles (25%, 50%, 75%) indicating typical (median) conditions and the scatter (i.e. measure of variability) around the median (difference in 75- and 25- percentiles). The frequency of days with at least 50% snow coverage and the snow depletion curves for selected winters are used to show the variability in snow cover duration across Slovakia.

![Fig. 1. Estimation of snow line (SL) elevation for Váh/Liptovský Mikuláš basin in spring 2006. Points represent estimated and interpolated SL elevation, respectively. SL is interpolated for days with cloud coverage larger than 70%.](image-url)
STUDY AREA AND DATA

In this study, Slovakia is divided into ten main river basins: Lower Váh/Danube, Myjava/Rudava, Nitra, Bodrog /Uh, Ipeľ, Slaná, Hornád, Hron, Upper Váh and Poprad according to Majerčáková (2002). Part of the Váh and Uh River basins is situated outside of Slovakia, so the analyses presented here consider only Slovak parts of these rivers. The delineation of the main river basins is based on the actual basin boundaries, with an exception of splitting the Váh River basin into the Upper and Lower parts. Splitting the Váh River and combining the Lower Váh with small Danube tributaries allows a more uniform representation of the runoff regime in the lowland part of Slovakia. Figure 2 shows location of the basins and indicate their runoff regime type. All river basins are affected by snowmelt and represent three runoff regimes defined by Šimo and Zaťko, 2002: (a) temporary snow regime in high mountains; (b) snow-rain regime in middle mountains and (c) rain-snow regime in lowlands.

Table 1 summarizes the main basin characteristics. Size of the basins ranges from 1966 km² (Poprad) to 9421 km² (Upper Váh), mean elevation varies from 154 m a.s.l. (Lower Váh/Danube) to 852 m a.s.l. (Poprad). There are no glaciers in Slovakia. The seasonal snow cover entirely melts by summer except a few firm fields in highest parts of the High Tatra Mountains in northern Slovakia.

The snow cover data are obtained from MODIS Terra and Aqua satellites. These datasets are available since 2000. For analyses, we use the daily snow cover products (MOD10A1 (V005), MYD10A1 (V005), Hall et al., 2006). The images were downloaded from the NSIDC data center and reprojected to the JTSK projection by using MRT tool. In order to reduce the effects of clouds, both products were merged by using methodology presented in Parajka and Blöschl (2008b). The final combined gridded maps show three classes (snow cover, land, clouds) in spatial resolution of 500 m. The variability in snow cover characteristics is evaluated for winters in the period 2000–2014. Seasonal snow cover is typically present in different parts of Slovakia between November and May. The winter period is thus defined between these months.

Snow line elevation and hypsometric curves of the basins are derived from a digital elevation model (DEM) with spatial resolution of 500 m. This DEM is resampled from original 10m DEM of Slovakia. The 500 m resolution is selected to represent the spatial resolution of MODIS snow cover maps.

Table 1. Elevation (m a.s.l.) and size (km²) of the main Slovak basins. Elevation is estimated from a digital elevation model of 500 m spatial resolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basin</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Min. elevation</th>
<th>Max. elevation</th>
<th>Mean elevation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Váh/Danube</td>
<td>5985</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myjava/Rudava</td>
<td>2264</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodrog/Uh</td>
<td>7269</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1118</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitra</td>
<td>4490</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>1288</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipeľ</td>
<td>3650</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1084</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaná</td>
<td>3208</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>1448</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornád</td>
<td>5325</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>1846</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hron</td>
<td>5463</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Váh</td>
<td>9421</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>2270</td>
<td>704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poprad</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>2429</td>
<td>852</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS  
Snow line (SL) elevation

Seasonal variability of snow line elevation in the main Slovak basins is presented in Figure 3. While whiskers show the 10% and 90% percentiles, the box shows the 25%, 75% percentiles and median of SL elevation in different months. The blue area shows the hypsometric curve of each basin derived from DEM. The results indicate that the lowest SL elevation and hence the largest snow coverage occurs in all basins in January and February. There are, however, differences between the basins in terms of the number of days the SL elevation is below the mean basin elevation. In Poprad and Upper Váh basins, the SL occurs below the mean basin elevation in more than 50% of days in the period December to February. In these basins, the SL has the largest variability within the winter period, particularly in November and April, when most of the investigated basins are without snow cover for most of the time. Contrary, in the Lower Váh/Danube, Myjava/Rudava, Ipeľ, Nitra and Slaná and basins, the median SL is above the mean basin elevation in the entire winter season. Here, the seasonal variability in the SL is the smallest, but the median SL is situated at elevations which represents less than 20% (Myjava/Rudava) and 40% (Ipeľ, Slaná) of the basin area. In Lower Váh/Danube basin, the median SL is situated in elevations which represent less than 5% of basin area. Hron, Bodrog/Uh and Hornád basins have

![Fig. 3. Seasonal variability (November to May) of snow line elevation in main Slovak basins in the period 2001–2014. Box-whisker plots represent 10%, 25%, 50%, 75% and 90% percentiles of snow line elevation. Blue area represents hypsometric curve of the basin.](image-url)
the median of SL below the mean basin elevation in January and February and 50% days in December is at least 20% of area covered by snow. Inter-annual variability of SL elevation is presented in Fig. 4. In order to more clearly exhibit differences between the basins and snow poor and rich winters, box-whisker plots (Fig. 4) show the SL variability in January and February only. Results of Fig. 4 indicate that the snow richest winters are 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2013 and winters in 2001, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014 are characterized by large median value of SL elevation, so are classified as snow poor. The lowest SL values in the period 2001–2014, i.e. the snow-richest winters, occur in 2003, 2006 and 2013. The highest SL values in individual basins, i.e. the snow-poorest winters occurred in different winters (in 2007 or 2014).

Figures 3 and 4 indicate that there is a considerable difference in the SL elevations between the basins. Three groups of basins are identified in Slovakia according to similar SL regime. The first group includes Poprad, Upper Váh, Hron and Hornád which have considerable parts of the basin above 1000 m a.s.l. and the highest elevations exceed 1500 m a.s.l. Winter median SL in these basins is equal or close to minimum elevation in snow rich winters. Even in snow poor winters have

**Fig. 4.** Inter-annual variability in snow line elevation in main Slovak basins in January and February. Box-whisker plots represent 10%, 25%, 50%, 75% and 90% percentiles of snow line elevation. Blue area represents hypsometric curve of the basin.
Variability of snow line elevation, snow cover area and depletion in the main Slovak basins in winters 2001–2014

Poprad, Upper Váh and Hron the SL close to the mean basin elevation. Larger snow cover strongly reflects in the dominant rain-snow runoff regime with highest flows in May and June (Šimo and Zarčko, 2002).

Second group of basins consists of mid-altitude basins with maximum elevation around 1000 m a.s.l. (Slaná, Ipeľ, Nitra, Bodrog). Median SL varies between 150 and 550 m a.s.l. in January and February, which represents approximately 40–80% snow coverage. Median SL value during the snow poor winters is at maximum basin elevation. This means that in such winters are basins snow free approximately 50% of days in January and February. Dominant runoff regime in these middle-mountain basins is rain-snow combined with distinct secondary increase of runoff at the end of the autumn (Šimo and Zarčko, 2002).

The third group of basins includes the Rudava/Myjava and Lower Váh/Danube. These basins have their maximum altitude only less than 700 m a.s.l. Only a small percentage of the Lower Váh/ Danube basin area is covered with snow for half of the season even during the snow rich winters. The Danube and Morava Rivers have their origin outside of Slovakia, mountain parts of these basins were not studied in this work. However, their runoff regime is influenced by the mountains located outside of Slovakia. Therefore, they exhibit the snow-rain combined, temporary snow and rain-snow combined regimes (Šimo and Zarčko, 2002).

Snow cover area (SCA)

Figure 5 shows the seasonal distribution of SCA in the main Slovak basins. The snow coverage typically starts in December and last to February. In the highest basins (Poprad, Upper Váh), the snow season sometimes tends to start earlier (November)

**Fig. 5.** Seasonal variability of snow cover area (SCA, %) in main Slovak basins. The whiskers show 10% and 90% percentiles, box plots show 25% and 75% percentiles, the line connects the median of SCA for particular months.
and lasts to March/April. The median of SCA in November and April is, however, less than 10% in these basins. The lowest basins (Lower Váh, Myjava/Rudava) are not significantly covered with snow in the winter period. The median of SCA exceeds 10% in Myjava/Rudava basin only in January. The lowest SL elevation in January and February translates into the largest SCA values in all basins. The median SCA is above 70% in the highest basins (Poprad, Upper Váh, Hron) and varies between 25–70% in the mid-altitude basins (Slaná, Ipeľ, Nitra, Bodrog) in January and February. However, there is a considerable variability in seasonal coverage between the years. The SCA variability between years increases with decreasing mean elevation of the basins. For example, while Poprad basin is fully snow covered almost every January, the mean daily SCA varies between 30%–100% in Hron and it is between snow free and snow covered in lower basins. In November, December, March, the basins can be without significant snow cover even in the highest basins.

Inter-annual variability of the mean winter SCA is presented in Figure 6. It is calculated as the mean of all daily SCA values in the winter period. The largest mean SCA is observed in almost all basins in 2006. The exception is the Hornád and Slaná, where is the largest SCA observed in 2013. It ranges between more than 50% in the highest to more than 28% in the lowest basins. In snow poor winters (i.e. 2007, 2014) it decreases to less than 30% in Poprad and Upper Váh and less than 10% in Ipeľ, Myjava/Rudava and Lower Váh/Danube basins. The mean SCA in 2006 is 2 (Poprad) to more than 10 times (Myjava/Rudava and Lower Váh/Danube) larger than in 2014. Interestingly, there is no significant trend in mean SCA in the period 2001–2014, however periods (several winter seasons) with larger and smaller SCA exist. The blue line in Figure 6 represents the mean calculated for period 2001–2014.
Table 2. Number of days with at least 50% snow cover area (SCA) in the winter period (November–May); the yellow cells indicate the snow-poorest and blue indicates snow-richest winters in individual basins.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Winter period</th>
<th>L. Váh/ Danube</th>
<th>Myjava/Rudava</th>
<th>Nitra</th>
<th>Bodrog/ Uh</th>
<th>Ipeľ</th>
<th>Slaná</th>
<th>Hornád</th>
<th>Hron</th>
<th>Upper Váh</th>
<th>Poprad</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
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<td>2002</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>71</td>
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<tr>
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<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>55</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Snow cover depletion (SCD)

Snow depletion curves (SCD) in most winters do not have a simple evolution. Depletion of the snow cover is typically interrupted by temporary increases of the SCA. In fact, relatively uninterrupted SDCs have been found in all basins only in winter 2005. The SDC tends to start later and lasts longer in basins with higher mean elevation. Interestingly, the variability in SDC between the winters is much larger than between the basins. The SDC of analyzed winters starts between beginning of February to the end of March and on average lasts between 100–130 days in the highest mountains (Poprad). Figure 8 presents examples of SDC for the snow rich (2006) and poor (2014) winter. Snow depletion in Poprad basin starts the latest (March, 27) in 2006 and lasts more than three weeks. In the Upper Váh basin, the SDC starts six days earlier and also lasts six days shorter than in Poprad basin. Interestingly, there are two pairs of basins (Hron and Bodrog/Uh, Hornád and Nitra) with quite similar SDC that belong to different groups of basins. They start differently, but last approximately to the April, 1 in all four basins in 2006. The SDC in the lowest basins starts around March, 7, but in Myjava/Rudava basin snowmelt occurs about 10 days earlier than in Lower Váh/Danube basin. SDCs in 2014 are different. SDC is typically shorter than 10 days and less than 7 days in the highest and mid-altitude basins, respectively. The exceptions are Slaná and Hron basins where SDC lasts 12 and 23 days, respectively, however a significant decrease of SCA (more than 70%) is observed in less than 5 days. In the lowland basins, there are several episodes of short (i.e. less than 5 days) snow cover and snow cover appears and melts very quickly.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study evaluates the variability in snow line elevation, snow cover area and snow depletion curves in the main Slovak basins. In comparison to previous assessments based on station data or interpolated point snow depth measurements, it examines, for the first time, daily snow cover patterns observed by MODIS satellite for the entire basins. The main advantage of satellite data is that they provide spatial snow cover patterns at high spatial resolution and accuracy (Parajka and Blöschl, 2006). Previous assessments have evaluated duration of snow cover at selected climate stations or elevation zones. When we compare our results with trend assessment of Lapin et al. (2007), we see similar temporal patterns. Lapin et al. (2007) evaluated changes in the number of days with snow at five stations in Tatra Mountains in the period 1921–2006, and showed an increase of days with snow in the period 2001–2006. Our results also indicate an increase of mean snow cover area in that period, however a significantly lower snow cover area is observed in the next period 2007–2012. These results indicate that there is no significant change in the mean basin snow cover area in the period 2001–2014, but periods of snow rich and snow poor winter do exist, particularly in the mountain basins.

Results of the mean index of scatter analysis (i.e. variability around the snow line, Krajčí et al., 2014) show values between 3.4% in lowland and 12.2% in mountain basins, which is comparable or even less than found in Krajčí et al. (2014).

The comparison of snow rich and poor winters has demonstrated significant differences in the snow cover area, start and duration of snow cover depletion in the main Slovak basins. Winter 2006 represents snow rich winter with long snow cover depletion. This winter was reported by Dietz et al. (2012) as an exceptionally cold winter with an extraordinary long snow cover duration, particularly in Central Europe. Snow melt between late February and early April led to floods in large river basins of Danube and Elbe. Our results show that this winter has the largest number of days with at least 50% basin coverage and also the largest mean annual snow cover area in almost all basins (except Slaná and Hornád). The length of snow cover depletion, however, differs between the basins and winters. On average, we found that the snow cover depletion increases 1.4 days per 100 m of mean basin elevation. The longest snow cover depletion is 2 to 4 times longer than the mean.

Obviously, snow cover area and duration increases with increasing mean basin elevation. The differences between the eastern and western part of Slovakia due to increased effect of continentality are seen only in some winters. For example, if we compare Nitra and Bodrog, which are basins with similar mean elevation, the significant differences in mean snow cover area or snow cover duration are observed in winters 2003, 2008, 2012 or 2014. On average, mean winter snow cover area and duration of snow cover in Bodrog is 6% and 17 days larger than in Nitra basin, respectively. The patterns and duration of snow cover depletion are, however, not related to the mean snow cover area. The mean snow cover depletion is two days longer in Nitra (12 days) than in Bodrog (10 days) basin.

Our analysis focuses on the main Slovak basin. These basins are quite large and do not allow to investigate the other effects (such as orographic effects, orientation of the basin, effect of vegetation) that might control the spatio-temporal evolution of snow cover at smaller spatial scale. In the future we plan to extend the analysis to smaller basins. Our plan for the future is...
not only to evaluate the snow cover changes but also to investigate the link between snow cover characteristics and snowmelt induced runoff.

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Note: Colour version of Figures and Table 2 can be found in the web version of this article.