



EDITED BY DÁNIEL MIKECZ

# THE STATE OF THE MEDIA IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

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FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION For Freedom.  
Central Europe and the Baltic States



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# THE STATE OF THE MEDIA IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

Edited by Dániel Mikecz

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**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
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## Editor's Note

It is beyond any doubt that free press and freedom of speech are crucial prerequisites of democracies. These rights should not be taken for granted, but the freedom of press should be evaluated continuously. As the recent developments in the Hungary demonstrate, the freedom of speech does not necessarily ensure freedom of the press, which also depends inter alia does on the structure, the financing of media, and on a credo of journalism. The recent conference of Republikon Institute investigated the current media landscape in Hungary. Our aim was to start a discussion on the media consumption patterns, the ownership structure in the media and the distorting effect of advertising by the state and state-owned companies. Furthermore, a second panel was also planned for journalists to share and discuss their experiences about political pressure on the press.

In Hungary, the populist Orbán regime distorts the media landscape by channeling state funds to government-friendly media outlets. While the government claims that the press is free, the public broadcasters are echoing directly the government's propaganda and the oligarchs of the government shut down Népszabadság in 2016, the country's independent and biggest daily newspaper. Also, the oligarchs bought all regional daily print newspapers in 2017. Thus there is free speech in Hungary, however access to independent journalism is restricted. One strategy to overcome these difficulties is to rely on the support of readers and crowdfunding campaigns. On the other hand, fake news is distorting the free press as well. In contemporary societies many people spend much of their time as consumers and also as producers of media content. However, users and readers are not always aware of their media usage and the reliability of sources. The refugee crisis proved, how easily people could be manipulated by biased media outlets. Young people are much more exposed to this, since social media is their primary source of information, where much unverified information circulates. The youth from deprived regions are in addition much more vulnerable due to the lack of proper literacy socialization. Moreover, anti-democratic and populist political forces have a stronger presence in social media. Another crucial point is the pressure on independent and public media by the government. Thus, we want to tackle the problem of poor media literacy, which is a hotbed of exposure to radicalisation, political manipulation and the lack of self-representation of marginalized groups in the media. Our project, wishes to assess the state of independent journalism in Hungary and promote the idea of conscious media consumption. We also aim to assess the best to practices of financing independent journalism and raising media literacy. Also, as part of the project experts will discuss these issues with young Hungarians.

**Gábor Horn**

## **Media Education: Weapon of the Weak**

Our depressing privation is that, for years, public education in Hungary has not incorporated anything essential about the digital world into the curriculum; media consumption awareness, critical and sceptical internet use. Additionally, the internet and the digital picture have sadly been underrepresented in Hungarian grammar schools as an opportunity and method, as a means for promoting the teaching of traditional general education subjects. This Spring, the pandemic lifted the time capsules of the 20th Century with coercive force. The work of open, progressive and diligent educators towards modernisation should be continued, building on their valuable experience and conclusions. The misfortune in front of the smartboard, the ridiculous attachments, the sour world of overhead projectors and photocopied worksheets must be forgotten. Look for yourself! What an innocent and well-intentioned phrase, still it typically remains an outsider. Children do nothing else but look into things. For them, digital repositories, lexicons, encyclopedias are not opaque and distant: they are comfortable, familiar parts of their everyday lives, sources of inexhaustible and fully comprehensive knowledge. About basketball shoes, Tesla, the germination of wheat grains, the ingredients for pizza dough, the history of hobbits, the Mozarts of electronic music, the conditions of deep-sea diving. If the teacher says it is interesting enough, then Il. Ferenc Rákóczi, covalent bonding, bauxite mining.

Within this case, there are two tasks, because as Lilla Hargitai summarizes, the media is both a subject and a tool. As she writes, “the media weaves through our lives. The tools used in education, such as games, infographic, image, or moving image, all contribute to the development of the following important skills: 1. Vision (detection, perception, observation), 2. The use of form and space through the application of the arts, 3. The malleability of the physical and aesthetic character of the materials around us, its role in expression, recognition, 4. Public awareness, 5. Social, human and natural knowledge by experience, 6. Aesthetic sense, social sensitivity: moral aspects.”

The first task is to channel the already existing abilities of children, the work they have already done, into their school life. It does not matter if the particular lexical knowledge they absorb from their phone is useful or not, the method works, and there can be no doubt about the proficiency of the users: just ask a fourteen-year-old about their momentary pain, if they have a few extra hours.

Thus, rather than teaching kids about this in a condescending manner, as if we could remotely grasp the mind-boggling speed at which they look for things, we could use

what they know. It is necessary to find time for their independently orbiting topics to make ground, which at the same time makes their obtaining of institutional, general knowledge within groups to be smoother and more continuous. As Andrea Alexandrov writes, ideally, “consumer behaviors typical of children (pace, creativity, interaction, etc.) attract them back to school.” Whether it is a freely chosen or school topic, two new challenges arise from its. Although it is certain that a child, from its own perspective, is much more unhindered on the internet, schools are responsible for ensuring that, in addition to accessibility, the parameters of caution, attention, and a credible internal censorship are developed. Under fortunate circumstances, conversation to this end are not a duty, but the need of schools for spiritual freshness. After all, regardless of internet use, students should be encouraged and taught use to critique resources and form autonomous opinions. If it does not work on its own, pre-planned, modular lessons are required that generally talk about the meaning of media literacy and address particular issues surrounding internet project work.

And this, like mathematics and Hungarian, must be in place from reception to graduation, since, as Dr. Zsuzsanna Horváth writes, “media awareness is relevant at all levels of education. Valid knowledge, personal civil rights, personal socialisation factors, learning, civic, working in real-life situations”. As well, “media education prepares for a participatory culture of democracy also for the development of a meaningful and valuable interpretive, activity-focused, critical attitude which is conscious of the influence of the media on the shaping of everyday life”.

Thus, what should be avoided, is a three-day rushed thematic media lesson, where the teacher ingrains the BBC’s code of ethics, without them or the child having any substantive knowledge of the UK media network. What is to be strived for is the transfer of flexible and combinable knowledge, which in the present helps and makes school learning safe, and in the future, with social awareness, Hungarian lessons and the pre-graduation psychology module, creates a reflexive relationship with the sociological and psychological aspects of the media and the digital world.

The other task is less an intellectual test, and more a question of the ability of colleagues to let go of the reins.

As I indicated in my May HVG article, it is important to pay attention now to the positive lessons learned from failed digital learning and the changing successes of distance learning. Primarily, in the more fortunate areas of the country at least, this is possible and good. It is good for kids to learn from each other, to share with each other what they have learned through digital research. In homes where there is no shortage of computers and telephones, this is the substantive part of learning: chat, task sharing, coordination. Let’s not put the children in a situation where there is shooting.

It will be even better once the pandemic is over, so that the thought of quarantine is not a strain on anyone. As proven, even then, children do not have to sit on the bench for eight hours five times a day.

As I wrote in the spring, “We should appoint a day that is individual or grouped, but definitely about independent research. Let’s keep one of the five days when children are not locked in and tied to a chair, when they do not receive points on the basis of some outdated nonsense criteria, when no one is disgusted with them for going at a different pace - for this day we should suspend the normative tempo delusion, there will be no standards, there will be no alignment. What there will be: the key to the treasury of all subjects, all arts, all sciences, and possible future professions - immersion. Depending on their age and habitus, children will take up a research topic alone or with peers, in a museum, library, archive, school computer room, or at home.”

Irrespective of media education, this also raises the question of the genuine role of student governments in Hungary. Where is the imitation of a seemingly proven Western pattern and how real is a group with an autonomous will? It would also be worth rethinking our views on this and give more power to the elected representatives of the children.

Thus, first of all, we need to think about how the existing screen dependence of students can be made useful as part of traditional lessons, what optional topics we could include, what information and other surrounding programs would be needed, and what opportunities this would open up outside of school.

The next important set of problems is, to some degree, also related to the lessons learned from quarantine. More images, even more visual content - including a lot of aesthetic, art history, significant film history - have become digitally available in response to the pandemic in museums, galleries, and cinemas.

Whether as part of the above-mentioned informative lessons or integrated into the curriculum of humanities, we should start talking about image dumping, selection, the subjective and canonical distinction between valuable and worthless, and the peculiarities of taste.

The film history to be included in the curriculum will be important in its own right and will contribute towards familiarity for children, serving additionally as an aid to history, Hungarian and social studies classes. Let’s expand the curriculum, and raise questions that are within a reasonable timeframe to the student, and can be discussed with parents and grandparents.

During socialism, the social scissors were more closed, deep poverty did not exist and there was less segregation amongst the Roma. In what way is this true, and how can it be

a bloodthirsty lie? Discuss what it meant to be an opposition artist, what characterized Aczél's cultural policy, what did the Poverty Support Fund do?

After the amnesty, the rigor of the dictatorship softened and political exclusion eased. What is revealed from shocking Károly Makk's kind of love, and what about Péter Gothár's infinitely entertaining spirit of the age, Stop from Time? Does admiring cola or rock 'n roll mean anything to a child today? What does the concept of ideology mean? What family stories define a child's image of socialism?

The Jewish community in Hungary live mostly in the capital, after the assimilation they prevailed in the urban, bourgeois and intellectual environment. What was the life of rural Jews like before World War I? How is it similar and different from that of Christian peasantry, what of this can you see in the Right's Rebellion? What does the concept of ritual mean? What does it mean to be born into a community and choose a community?

Basic questions, that we should also think about sometimes. Questions that really bring to life family memories, stories, bring to the fore and personalize issues of history and questions surrounding society.

Like all art inclusions, watching movies fosters empathy for the interiorization of a new, unusual, non-personal point of view. In Hungarian lessons, let's talk about non-verbal storytelling. What does the relationship between form and content mean? When a student scrolls on Instagram or Pinterest, they put together some narrative from the images they see there. What makes it different in a movie? What kind of directorial, cinematographic tricks can be discovered in a film that is meant to express the mood of the actors or events? What will make our relationship to visuality conscious? Let the kids, who are constantly photographing, learn something about what's going on in the minds of a professional photographer when they merge technical, storytelling, and aesthetic considerations.

In the same way, it is necessary for the history of Hungarian painting to play a greater role in public education. During quarantine, digital exhibitions in the long-awaited harmless freedom allowed classes to take advantage of the aforementioned free days in the museum and discover the connection between historical painting and the revolution, what social messages the twentieth-century avant-garde painting encoded, what did the close collaboration between underground music and conceptual art means under socialism.

Thus, this is the next level that uses new knowledge sources to support the standard curriculum. At the same time, Hungarian teachers are being forced to think about attitudes towards visuality and verballity in children.

Rather than the obsolescence, shortening, and simplifying of Jókai, Gárdonyi, Fern Molnár, Kosztolányi, and others, the posted readings could be supplemented. Let's be aware together that as long as scrolling defines the everyday lives of children with such force, they will be able to pay attention to letters with a different intensity. For now, we will not overturn the power of scrolling, but we will also not have to adapt to it in the ways listed above. For individuals, classes, readings, topics must be enjoyed, accepted, if necessary, visualised, using fine-tuned solutions.

As for building on the existing curriculum, teaching media awareness is the most difficult task. As Csilla Herzog and Réka Racsko summarize, according to NAT, the goal of teaching is "to enable students to become responsible participants in the mediated, global public, to understand the language of new and traditional media, to develop critical attitudes and to master action-oriented behaviour, which is inherent within the culture of democratic participation."

To do this, it would be incredibly important for the government to let go of the nonsense that politics has no place in school, and needs to change its communication. It makes sense that the responsible participants of the public, even beginners, should be able to assess different worldviews, attitudes, and feelings, to tolerate them, to comment on them, to judge them. This is an extremely complex task for a teacher. Preparing for this must not affect the current Hungarian party politics, but it must clarify the theoretical, ethical and technical foundations concerning the media and power.

All of this concerns another subject, English. Children who excel the high school level and are blessed with a good sense of languages also often suffer from a lack of technical vocabulary at foreign universities. Obviously, this problem can be solved over in the long-term period of time with expertise. In the meantime, however, it is easy to see that reading the English and American press will move the matter forward. We need to find time for common readings and interpretations. Let's open a case. This and that happened in the White House. How many ways have all the factual, simple reports reported all this? How many opinion articles does a particular profile newspaper contain? What is the significance of a seemingly abstract journalistic debate, how much can a long, intricately written article affect the will of the electorate? How do telegraph offices work abroad?

Going around these issues will fit into time in only a few places, which is why with the concept of László Hartai, a cross-curriculum will be needed. As he writes, "the cross-curricular form often reaches students with certain media education abilities who would be excluded from media education organized in a self-paced classroom." At the same time, all this needs to be reformed, as Hartai also claims that "the widespread form of cross-curriculum blurs and defocuses the content of media education. The knowledge content related to the subject decreases, it is unclear who should teach the media and

with what kind of expertise/qualification. Evaluation (and thus the effectiveness of development) is difficult to implement and interpret. In this context, the prestige of media education at school is declining, although education actors recognize its importance.”

In this case, too, it should be noted, of course, that children’s news consumption is visual and takes place on YouTube. On YouTube, an infinite number of partially harmful and deceiving videos are the underlying problem. At least as important, however, is to talk about the adverts that appear in incredible numbers, the psychology of advertising, and the concept of manipulation. What effects can an ad have? How can you stereotype your characters and target audience? What makes a social ad offensive and progressive? Consider the words of Andrea Alexandrov: “Advertising is particularly well-suited to discussing the phenomenon of stereotyping, and while it seems obviously more painless to use commercial advertising in this regard, it can be a serious educational benefit when students experience the change of perspective that is so common in social advertising that aims to break down panels of superficial or prejudiced thinking. The next aspect of the analysis of advertisements, the topic of identity and pattern-following, is also connected with lessons for primarily educational purposes (class teacher, morality). When we examine what behavioral patterns are displayed as attractive, whether in connection with a product, or vice versa, which patterns they have deterred and at the same time “protect” us through the use of a product or service, the society of our time is already in the field of the role opportunities, and we can be aware of our own attitudes towards these roles.”

Of course, how much time will come to these seemingly abstract questions is another matter. A significant proportion of domestic schools simply lack resources. Addressing this is not one of the theoretical problems of media education. The lack of time and money is serious, and many of us have written a lot about it. An integration program needs to be developed to see digital vocational training as the most fundamental opportunity for social mobility.

Thus, this primarily concerns the significant development of IT education, however, media education is not independent of all of this either. Clearly, only a person who can adequately filter out the deceptions, abuses, and misconceptions of the digital world can meet the challenges of a digital job.

In summary, teacher training and the rethinking of the curriculum should keep the following goals in mind.

In media education, a distinction needs to be made between the problem of the topic and the use of tools. Quarantine experiences and the amazing digital confidence of children need to be integrated. All this should be underlined with information that educates caution and reflection. Opportunities for out-of-school learning should be

considered. In the spirit of the basic curriculum's commitment to Hungarian culture, we must delve deeper into the history of Hungarian film and painting. It is along this line that cross-curricular approaches to media education need to be rethought. Children should be introduced to important English and American papers. In the poorer parts of the country, the promise of progress must be built on IT classes and media education.

I wish my colleagues good work and open thinking for all this!

**Błażej Lenkowski**

## **The Importance of a Well-Functioning Public Media: The Case of Poland**

The crisis of the public media in Poland and the related pathologies have been growing for years. The phenomena that are particularly shocking today – especially since Jacek Kurski, a politician of the United Right party, took over the reins of the public television (TVP) – but they actually have their origins in a faulty legal framework in which the Polish public media operate in, and, until recently, a widely accepted disregard for the mission and tasks that they should perform.

The legal framework of the public media has made them become prey for the right-wing political camp that managed to seize power in the country. The eventual current extent of blatant pro-ruling-camp propaganda spewed by the public media was dependent solely on how decent the officers appointed by politicians and managing these media outlets are. It is no coincidence that at the helm of the Polish public television stands Jacek Kurski – the propaganda farce he has transformed these media outlets into is not an accident either. This ready-to-go tool was almost waiting for some cynic who would overtly abuse it with the full support of the ruling political camp.

As a result of such a legal framework and growing cynicism of politicians, lack of any scruples when fighting for power, and an ever-growing disregard for the unwritten principles of political coexistence in a democratic state as well as for the values that the public television shall foster, it is not surprising that, sooner or later, the public media in Poland were destined to become a mixture of a propaganda-oriented farce, mass manipulation, and the production of cheap entertainment for the masses.

Jacek Kurski has for many years played the role of Jarosław Kaczyński's brutal media bull terrier. Back in 2005, right before he was to go on the air during a radio broadcast on Radio TOK.FM, he reportedly said what later became an infamous manifestation of his beliefs about the Polish media, i.e.: "This whole Wehrmacht case is lame, but we are bound to push it cause the dumb people will buy it" (MIG, 2016). Kurski the cynic, has for years believed that he is capable of managing the moods of a large part of the Polish public opinion by means of blatant propaganda and manipulation. Many commentators of public life (and even politicians of the currently ruling political camp) who watched what has been happening on public television in recent years, considered this policy to be so radical and far-reaching that it was said it simply could not bring the effects desired by the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party. The series of elections in the years 2019-2020, and especially the 2020 presidential election, in which the Law and Justice (PiS) party managed to significantly mobilize its electorate, have shown that Kurski's policy is, in fact, effective.

When designing a new Poland after the PiS rule, one must clearly realize that in many respects a profound legal and institutional revolution will have to take place. Personnel changes will not be enough. One of such key areas of a much-needed change is the public television. The failure to regulate its broadest possible apoliticality in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland is a manifestation of a serious negligence on the part of its authors. The future law-abiding, liberal, and democratic Poland must be much more immune to the actions of populist cynics than was the case in the system of the Third Republic.

## Public Media in Poland: Pathologies and the Involvement in the 2020 Presidential Campaign

The pathological use of the public media to support one political option reached its historic peak during the campaign for the re-election of the incumbent President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda. All masks, subtleties, and tricks used in the past have come to light. Jacek Kurski decided to opt for open, brazen propaganda. As a result, in during this crucial period, there was no room in the public television for equality and equal treatment of all candidates – instead, the public TV channels proceeded to manipulate and over-interpret the events by constantly attacking the main opposition candidate, Rafał Trzaskowski.

In terms of the campaign before the first election round, contrary to its prior actions, the public broadcaster consequently ignored the young far-right candidate, Krzysztof Bosak, who competed for a similar electorate as Andrzej Duda. At the same time, all reports on the activities of the incumbent President closely resembled that of the North Korean television programs of the Kims.

It was on the public television (more often than it was exhibited by the right-wing politicians themselves) that the content and messages building up discord and scaring voters with imaginary threats appeared. The opposition candidate was misrepresented as linked to the dark “German” or “Jewish” forces, allegedly threatening the “Polish” interests. An incredible media effort was put to bind the figure of Rafał Trzaskowski with LGBT+ movements, which, according to the TV propaganda, threaten traditional Polish values, the safety of the family or children. Nothing equally disturbing and drawing on the worst instincts and fears of a part of the Polish society has been observed in the Third Republic of Poland since 1989 – especially, since such a message is not conveyed by someone with a marginal influence, but is backed by the authority of the public media.

Trzaskowski, the current mayor of Warsaw, was being attacked every day for any issue related to the city management. Trivial problems were being blown out of proportion. He was, for instance, targeted by public television when it turned out that

one of the Warsaw public transport drivers had been caught driving a vehicle under the drug influence. Trzaskowski would be also associated with a sewage treatment plant failure, or even blamed for the slow pace of water leaving the streets of the capital city after a heavy rain. Anything could be leveraged to attack him.

It is also worth emphasizing that a large part of voters in Poland, especially those living in the rural areas, are faced with media exclusion, and thus voted for PiS, as typically recommended by a local priest. Poland is one of the least urbanized countries in the European Union – 40% of the country's population (15.3 million inhabitants) still lives in the countryside. Another 5 million live in cities with less than 20,000 inhabitants, whereas merely 7,600,000 million live in big cities (which are traditionally liberal and do not support PiS) with over 200,000 inhabitants (*Ile osób mieszka w miastach, a ile na wsi?*, 2019). Moreover, the countryside is inhabited primarily by the elderly, whose main source of information and knowledge about the world is the widely available public media and the extremely fundamentalist Radio Maryja. Private media often do not reach such areas or require installing an expensive satellite or optical fiber connectors. The elderly also rarely use the Internet.

Because Rafal Trzaskowski was strongly opposed to the way information was disseminated by public television, from the very beginning of his campaign, he made it clear that he would fight the current model of the public media. He announced the need for a radical change and liquidation of the public television news program. The relation between public television and the main presidential opposition candidate was strongly polarized and soon reached its zenith. Trzaskowski ultimately refused to participate in the presidential debate before the second round of elections organized by public television. Soon after, the incumbent President refused to participate in the debate organized by independent media, which was to be streamed via a private TV station, TVN. For the first time in the history of democratic Poland, there was no face-to-face debate between two candidates running for the office of the President of the Republic of Poland before the second round of elections. Trzaskowski's staff justified their decision with the fact that the debate was to be curated by the public TV broadcaster, hosted by extremely biased journalists, and staged in the small town of Konskie, where a local TV-friendly audience clearly favored Duda.

The uneven playing field in this potential media clash was a fact, and so Trzaskowski was rightly indignant at such a way of preparing this vital debate. However, taking into account the final results of the elections and the actual media exclusion of a large part of Polish voters, this was the only chance Trzaskowski had to reach this electorate, “turn the tables”, and belie the lying propaganda. Ultimately, in the second round, Andrzej Duda won with 51.03 percent of the vote, whereas Rafal Trzaskowski received 48.97 percent. The turnout was at a record level of 68.18 percent. 10,440,648 Poles voted for Andrzej Duda, and 10,018,263 voters supported Rafal Trzaskowski.

The Polish Ombudsman, Adam Bodnar, was very critical of the above described situation: “The necessity for the public media to organize debates between candidates is rooted in Polish law. In accordance with the regulation of the National Broadcasting Council of July 6, 2011, on the detailed rules and procedures for conducting debates by Telewizja Polska Spółka Akcyjna [Polish Television Joint-Stock Company] (Journal of Laws No. 146, item 878), Telewizja Polska SA is obliged to conduct debates between the candidates in the elections for the President of the Republic of Poland. It shall ensure equal conditions for participation in the debate for all candidates. The regulations of the National Broadcasting Council [KRRiT] also dictate that TVP SA shall conduct a debate without the presence of the audience in a studio. These provisions, however, have not been fully applied in practice. This could actively prevent many Polish citizens from being able to objectively learn about the platforms and the visions for the presidency of both candidates” (Ile osób mieszka w miastach, a ile na wsi?, 2019).

The opinion of public media activities in the presidential campaign by representatives of international organizations was also extremely negative. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), specifically its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which monitored and then assessed the activities of the Polish public media in the 2020 election campaign, “Polarized media environment, especially biased reports presented by the public broadcaster remained a major concern. The refusal of both candidates to meet in a joint debate deprived voters of the opportunity to compare their platforms. (...) The ODIHR mission observed cases of xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-Semitic rhetoric of intolerance, which was visible especially in the campaign of the current President and exhibited by the public broadcaster.” The findings of several civil society groups that were monitoring the media during the campaign are in line with the ODIHR mission's assessment of the first election round, according to which the public television failed to fulfill its legal obligation to be impartial, with the TVP coverage clearly favoring the incumbent President. According to the data provided to the ODIHR mission by the National Broadcasting Council, the public television and radio had devoted much more airtime to the ruling party even before the presidential campaign started” (Misja Specjalna Oceny Wyborów ODIHR, 2020).

During the presidential campaign, Law and Justice blurred the line between that which relates to the party with the aspects related to the state. State resources have been involved in the presidential campaign of the incumbent President on an unprecedented scale. Apart from the obvious use of the public television, the ruling party also used other state institutions for its benefit. A journalist of TVN 24, Konrad Piasecki, revealed that the Minister of Agriculture, Krzysztof Ardanowski, used KRUS (a state institution paying pensions to farmers) to send a letter with the seal of KRUS to all insured persons urging them to vote for President Andrzej Duda – a piece of information in which was later confirmed by the Ministry.

## Why Public Media Shall Differ from Commercial Media Outlets

Nevertheless, outrageous political propaganda is not the only issue that may be observed in the way the public television in Poland operates. Since, virtually, its inception in the times of the Third Republic of Poland, the conversation about its mission-oriented character was only a smokescreen to the sad truth that it was constructed in such a manner so as to actually compete with commercial TV stations for the viewer. Favoring productions in poor taste in a bid to garner high viewership ratings constituted a bleak reality of that period. The number of ambitious programs kept decreasing on a yearly basis. The success of the programs was measured only by viewership, and thus by an opportunity to sell the most expensive advertising. This may, indeed, be a natural course of action in the capitalist system, but only for the non-publicly funded commercial media. Most of the public television channels (with the exception of the TVP Kultura channel) basically do not differ in any way from private television broadcasts when it comes to the standard of programming.

Offering cheap entertainment, the massification of poor taste, producing TV series with an easy-to-follow plot, talk shows, or commercial films – these have been the primary activities conducted by the public television in Poland. Of course, the viewers have the right to have access to all of this, as the demand should be generated by the supply – but it seems that private broadcasters can effectively respond to this type of demand by earning money on such activities, acquiring funds directly from the market. After all, this is what business is all about. However, this process shall take place without the participation of extensive public funds.

The public television in Poland is financed by a special tax paid by citizens: the so-called RTV subscription. According to the Wirtualne Media portal, the National Broadcasting Council predicted that in 2020, the revenues from the RTV subscription will amount to PLN 650 million. The public media also generates huge revenues from the sale of commercial advertising. But that is not all. It is worth mentioning that on February 13, 2020, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, by the votes of PiS MPs, rejected the objection of the Senate (dominated by the opposition) to the amendment to the Broadcasting Act and the subscription law, awarding compensation of PLN 1.95 billion in 2020 to the public media. The funds were divided among radio and television units by the National Broadcasting Council for the purpose of implementing the “public mission”. What this phrase means in today's bleak reality of the public media remains unclear. Obviously, TVP received the majority of these funds. The Fakt weekly reported that the operations of the public news channel, TVP Info, in 2019 cost PLN 167.6 million. In 2020, the amount will probably be at a similar level or may even record an increase. Considering the nature of the channel's operations, it may be assumed that this is the amount that was designated to support the 2019

parliamentary election campaign of Law and Justice, and later the 2020 presidential campaign of Andrzej Duda.

A rather unusual interpretation of the mission of the public media was also presented in Spring 2020 by the management of Polish Radio Three. For decades, this radio had offered its audiences a more ambitious perspective on music, aimed at today's generation of 40, 50, and 60-year-olds. It featured a wide variety of rock and jazz placed in a cultural context by a unique team of experienced journalists and radio hosts. In April 2020, Kazik Staszewski, a controversial Polish rock singer and songwriter, released on the radio his latest song criticizing PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski for the lack of equality when visiting deceased relatives in Polish cemeteries on Easter during the pandemic. During that period, cemeteries were closed to the general population – except for Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who visited the cemetery with his bodyguards. The track hit the top of the radio charts. As a result of a quick intervention by the radio management, the radio host in charge of the broadcast was forced to revoke the radio top chart for that day and take the song off the air. Most of the leading radio hosts who still remembered the fight against censorship before 1989 left the radio station in protest. Later on, the President of the Polish Radio, Agnieszka Kaminska, decided to ban all other Polish Radio Three journalists from speaking to the media (Kazimierczuk, 2020).

Nevertheless, the degradation of the public media does not only concern purely political issues. The public media shall also be dedicated to the implementation of an educational mission, showcasing ambitious art or music, shaping people's tastes. The Polish public television, however, began to pursue the opposite direction, promoting, for example, disco-polo music, considered by all music critics to be a disastrous trend – TVP hosted, for instance, Zenek Martyniuk, a disco-polo singer, during its New Year's Eve program. And all this is being done solely to embrace the poorest tastes of the PiS voters from rural areas and draw them to their TV sets.

The reasoning behind financing the public television by Polish taxpayers was that it was supposed to carry out its mission, and not compete with private stations for commercial viewership. Today, the implementation of the mission, with the exception of the niche TVP Kultura channel, Belsat TV, and possibly also Polish Radio Two is almost impossible to justify. At the same time, a steady stream of public funds utilized to finance, basically, commercial media encourages mismanagement and distorts competition on the market, giving the public media a privileged position at the expense of commercial media, which cannot rely on similar subsidies.

## Institutional Background for Building Non-Partisan and Well-Functioning Public Media

In practice, the institutional foundations of the public media in Poland may, actually, enable their complete politicization. In 2016, the parliamentary majority of the Law and Justice party established a collective body that appoints and dismisses the management boards and supervisory boards of TVP, Polish Radio, and the Polish Press Agency – the National Media Council. It virtually made it possible for the ruling party to take full control of the public media. The Council is composed of three members elected by the Sejm and two members appointed by the President of the Republic of Poland, who are to be shortlisted by the largest opposition clubs. The term of office of a Supervisory Board member is 6 years. Therefore, the Council gave the ruling party full control of the Polish public media.

Let us, however, not forget that the previous legal framework determining the method of appointing persons for the key positions in the public media also did not ensure apoliticality – nonetheless, it was not so blatant. Supervisory boards of the public media, which selected, among others, the president of the Polish Television, were appointed by the National Broadcasting Council – a constitutional body that shall uphold the freedom of speech, the right to information, and the public interest in radio and television broadcasting. However, calling it an apolitical body would also be amiss. The Council consists of 5 members, who are elected by: the Sejm (2 members), the Senate (1), and the President of the Republic of Poland (2).

The term of office of KRRiT members is 6 years. Although the National Broadcasting Council did not grant the parliamentary majority an automatic majority, if control was taken over by one party (as is the case in Poland at the moment) which both has the majority in the Sejm and holds the position of the President of the Republic of Poland, the Council would also become a body completely dependent on one political party. Appointing persons to the abovementioned supervisory boards of the public media by the National Broadcasting Council was, unfortunately, regulated at the level of a legal act, not as part of the constitutional provisions.

Professor Wojciech Lis of the Catholic University of Lublin described the National Broadcasting Council as: “a body that is tied to an extremely important sphere of human life, which is the freedom of speech and the right to information. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland lists it as one of the bodies of state control and legal protection. Thus, by the will of the state, it is responsible for creating conditions for the free exchange of views and flow of information, but with due regard to the public interest. The legislator has entrusted it with the responsibility of maintaining the standards appropriate to democratic states and societies that consider themselves civilized. A chance for proper performance of tasks is provided by independence

from the government and by how difficult it is to dismiss its members before the end of the term of office” (Wojciech 2015). Nevertheless, in practice, the operations of the said body have proven something completely different, as its institutional form also prevents the implementation of its mission.

The National Broadcasting Council has already been the subject of never-ending controversies and politicization in the past. Let us refer to the so-called “Rywin Gate”, which contributed to the collapse of Leszek Miller’s left-wing government in 2004. In 2002, the National Broadcasting Council, then chaired by Danuta Waniek, heavily dependent on the then government, drafted a controversial bill presented to the Sejm by Leszek Miller’s government aimed at amending the Broadcasting Act (the so-called “major amendment” to the media law). It was to introduce deconcentration provisions, i.e. a ban on the creation of corporations that would be both press publishers and radio or television broadcasters. The ambiguities and controversies surrounding this bill (including the disappearance of the infamous phrase “or a magazine” from the draft) led to the establishment of an investigative commission on the Rywin Gate and ultimately to the fiasco of the draft in the Sejm. The bill served as a tool in a potentially dirty game and an attempted bribery, which was later revealed by the Editor-in-Chief of the “Gazeta Wyborcza daily”, Adam Michnik.

In order to create a well-functioning framework of the public media, which shall be described in the next paragraph, an institutional revolution is needed – one that will prevent these media from falling prey to an influential political camp. Therefore, the policy on the public media in Poland after the end of the rule of the Law and Justice party shall bring about a radical change in the legal framework of the procedures for appointing persons for the key positions in the public media. The return to the statutory provisions from before 2016 is not a solution to this problem.

The National Media Council, preferably renamed as the Public Media Council, should become a much broader body elected not only by politicians, but also by representatives of various social and professional groups. Then, its current three members selected by the Sejm and two appointed by the President of the Republic of Poland, shortlisted by the largest opposition clubs, could be selected by: the conference of rectors of public schools, an association of student self-governments, the two largest trade unions in the country, medical self-government, legal self-government, self-governments of such industries as literature, film, theater, and music, as well as, possibly, a representative of the European Parliament. Of course, this list could also be much more detailed – but the general idea is that people appointed by politicians would constitute a minority in the body, which would, in turn, provide a mechanism preventing a complete politicization of the public media and deterioration in its quality. Moreover, its members should be replaced gradually, e.g. 1/3 of all members every two years, with a six-year term of office.

In the long term, the Public Media Council elected in this manner could replace the National Broadcasting Council as a constitutional body. This would require a constitutional majority, but would ensure that the public media are independent of the will of one political party.

A reform of the way of financing public media should also take place. An interesting model was proposed by Beata Chmiel, a Polish cultural manager and social activist, one of the initiators and leaders of the Citizens of Culture movement, a signatory of the Pact for Culture, who calls for the elimination of the RTV subscription, which she deems an unfair tax burden: “The current subscription is quite anachronistic. In addition, in Poland, it constitutes a completely compromised formula for financing the public media. The subscription or the audiovisual fee charged by the state, which once we advocated for, needs to be substituted with something that has already proven effective. We are already used to purchasing subscriptions, paying for the access to various music, film, or TV series platforms, books and audiobooks. We subscribe to newspapers and news portals, which seemed impossible only a few years ago. The pandemic has only accelerated this process. If we transform television and radio into a public platform, available for a small fee, we, the viewers, will be able to program our own public media from public resources. It sounds a bit futuristic, but it is not impossible” (Szczęśniak, 2020). A mixed model of financing the public media – partly from subscription, and partly subsidized by the state – combined with the cancellation of the current tax mechanism and lower advertising revenues due to the change of the type of offered content, should be the desired direction of such a reform.

## Recommendations on Creating Well-Functioning Public Media

The Public Media Council created in this manner could undertake a radical transformation of the shape of the public media in Poland. The extent of such a change should, however, be much different than the one proposed by Rafał Trzaskowski in his campaign. Reliable, pluralistic information programs, and a news and current affairs channel reaching every corner of Poland are vital. The postulate of their elimination that resonated in Rafał Trzaskowski's election campaign may be considered as a solely campaign-oriented idea, and not a rational demand.

The implementation of the mission should mean, above all, a radical change in the programming schedule and the abandonment of broadcasting and producing commercial programs. Perhaps one (or more) of the public television channels intended for such productions could simply be privatized. The rest should be transformed into reliable, thought-provoking sources of knowledge about the world, culture, nature, art, music, politics, and featuring ambitious films. Perhaps channels devoted to specific topics should be created, available online also for younger

audiences. The public television should also launch a modern digital transformation by organizing its content in an appealing manner, based on solutions known from platforms such as Netflix. Disco-polo concerts, telenovelas, programs such as The Voice of Poland or “I Love You Poland” will easily find their place and work well commercially in private channels. There is absolutely no reason why taxpayers' resources should be designated to pay for productions of this kind.

Thanks to its reach and habits of Polish viewers, the public media are capable of performing a truly unique educational function and constitute a real forum of public debate in a true democracy. They can be an institution that will be respected by all parties across the political spectrum. Is it likely that re-shaping the public media in the abovementioned manner would lower viewership ratings? Yes, it is. But their mission should be focused on education, teaching critical thinking, showing different perspectives, and broadcasting ambitious programs – those that are unlikely to find a place in the mass commercial media. Competing with commercial media for the viewer simply cannot and should not be the goal of the public media.

Nowadays, Polish citizens have found themselves at the point where what shall be considered by the only logical and sensible solution seems to the majority of political parties as well as taxpayers like a political utopia guided by naivety. A democracy and a society that want to become successful in the future by means of a peaceful process, develop harmoniously, create a civic and national community, will not survive without effective educational institutions, which are the agents of promoting a positive change and being the gatekeepers of the political debate respected by all parties. Our society and the Polish state will lose the day if they fail to build some of their pillars anew. One of these should, undeniably, be the new public media.

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**Dr. Šárka Prát:**

## **How to Strength Independent Media in Visegrad Group**

In the twenty-first century, communication technology has allowed information to be shared instantly with millions of people anywhere in the world. Communication or transfer of information from individuals or groups of people to other individuals or groups is key for every community.

Canadian media rhetoric Marshall McLuhan maintains that various types of media have different effects on society. He became famous for saying, “The media is the message.” In other words, society is influenced by the type of media rather than the content the medium conveys. For example, a society in which social media plays a big role, is obviously very different from a society that relies on written messages transferred by ocean steamships. Everyday life is in society; in society today lightening-speed television brings news from the other side of the globe, perceived differently than society relied on horses, ships, or telegrams. According to McLuhan, electronic media has a tendency to create a global community where people across the world follow events as they unfold and therefore are connected. Billions of people across the globe recognize pictures of celebrities like Paris Hilton or Madonna before their own neighbors.

For decades we have witnessed the convergence of the production process, distribution, and consumption of information. Even thirty years ago there were various kinds of communication, like print, television, and film, still relatively individual spheres, but today they are considerably interconnected. Differences between the individual communication forms are not as dramatic as before; television, radio, newspapers, and telephones are undergoing profound changes as a result of the technological process and rapid expansion of the internet. Although newspapers play a central role in our lives, the method of how they are organized and provided is changing. Newspapers can be read online; cell phone and digital television usage have spread and satellite broadcasts allow viewers unseen varieties to choose from. However, who will ensure that we receive news from quality sources and thus preserve the independence of the media? The main role of the media should be to inform and not influence or even directly implement. The question remains: the media really just media or can they work as a political weapon?

Fixing media polarization and strengthening independent media seems daunting and appears outside of the policy realm. This is mainly because many potential proposals that assure the independence of media from external control also paradoxically require the active cooperation of political institutions. However, the concrete societal and policy initiatives can curtail the negative effects of today’s media. As the co-founder of Vox Ezra Klein points out, “the news media isn’t just an actor in politics. It’s arguably the most

powerful actor in politics,” - largely because of its ability to consciously filter out stories to publish and craft a particular narrative around them (Klein, 2020). Media competition has led news outlets toward sensationalism, as well as anesthetization, and celebritization of politics. As a result, intriguing stories are more interesting than straight facts. Moreover, the commercialization of media means cable news and social media networks are vying for ad revenue and consistent viewership. Without breaking up media companies or regulating social media for fake news, the negative effects of polarized media on democracy will persist. News is “biased, but not toward the left or right so much as toward loud, outrageous, colorful, inspirational, confrontational.” As a result, the media “is biased toward the political stories and figures who activate our identities (Klein, 2020).” This purposeful strategy to attract viewers only incites polarization instead of simply portraying the news. Moreover, polarized media’s effect on voting patterns and continued threat to democracy will persist due to the poor quality of education systems in the region. Central to the issue of polarization in the media is that people do not recognize when the news is biased and thus people with lower media literacy are more susceptible to the so-called “fake news”. For example, research from 2019 published in the journal *Science Advances* found that in the United States people above the age of 65 shared more fake news on Facebook than any other group during the 2016 elections (Chokshi, 2019).

The problem of polarized media is especially evident in the Visegrad countries. For example, in the Czech Republic, one news site known for publishing exaggerated facts and sensationalized news, *Parlamentní listy* (or “Parliamentary Letters”), has a monthly audience of about eight million users. The “alternative news” business is thriving in the Czech Republic (Schultheis, 2017). The outreach is not that great, but they’re amplifying [each other’s] messages. The Czech government and counterintelligence officials have discovered a similar trend, stating in 2016 that Russia was working to disseminate information aimed at disrupting the status quo politics in the Czech Republic through “weakening the strength of Czech media, promoting inter-societal and inter-political tensions” and spreading “disinformation and alarming rumors defaming the U.S. and NATO” (Vojtechovska, 2017). Moreover, as Martina Vojtechovska, a Professor of Media Studies at the Metropolitan University of Prague, has found out, many newspapers are now owned by national business groups with political ties (Vojtechovska, 2017). This has led to immense influence from politicians over the news media, limiting the independence of media sources and meaning that viewers are digesting and reading biased information. A similar trend can be observed in Slovakia where more than two thirds of citizens say they do not have trust in mainstream media based on a 2019 questionnaire by the Globsec Policy Institute (Globsec, 2019). Likewise, an alarming statistic that was widely medialized when first released by Focus in 2019 stated that more than half of middle school teachers would recommend prominent alternative media, like the newspaper *Zem a Vek*, the web portal *Hlavné správy.sk* or the live broadcaster *Slobodný Vysielač*, to their students (Goda, 2019). This demonization of mainstream media by the public is a result of how politicians speak of journalists: “If there were a hundred tornados in Slovakia like

in Cuba, they wouldn't have done as much damage as you have in Slovakia!", yelled the former Prime Minister Fico at journalists in parliament. Moreover, it did not help when Penta Investments, a Czecho-Slovak finance group now associated with a major corruption scandal known as "Gorilla" which revealed links to politicians and other high-profile figures, became a partial owner of SME's publisher Petit Press and continued buying other publications, like the tabloid newspaper Plus "1" den or the biggest newspaper written in "Hungarian" Uj Szo, from a variety of print publishers. The combination of these factors has been undermining the public's trust in mainstream media and give an explanation for why citizens do not believe in the independence of traditional media. Yet, the biggest wake-up call that brought tens of thousands of protesters to the streets was the first murder of a journalist in independent Slovakia in February, 2018. The motivation behind the murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancé was the fact that Kuciak was reporting extensively on the corruption allegations of a Slovak businessman Marián Kočner. Kočner, who is now charged with hiring a hitman to execute the murder, even called Kuciak several months prior to his death to threaten him by telling him that he would pay "special attention" to him and his relatives. When it was later revealed that Kočner paid private investigators to gather personal data on other prominent Slovak journalists, this scandal highlighted the intimate ties between crime and business and journalism operating in Slovakia.

In Hungary and Poland, concerns related to the freedom of the press lie rather in their close relationship with the government. For instance, in Hungary, the report from the end of 2019 by the International Press Institute and other major journalist associations stated this: "While avoiding the physical violence or the jailing of journalists common in autocratic regimes elsewhere, the Hungarian government has pursued a clear strategy to silence the critical press through deliberate manipulation of the media market" (Kisbenedek, 2019). The few independent media outlets that have been able to sustain themselves (despite the government harassing advertisers into not contracting them, being forced to compete with the pro-government outlets that receive a large amount of public resources, and often not having access to official press conferences and publicly held information), are mostly only able to reach the people who are actively looking for other sources of information than the pro-government narrative and people in the capital. This reality is also supported by independent research that, drawing from the same report, shows that nearly eighty percent of the market for political and public affairs news is "financed by sources decided by the ruling party". Similarly, in Poland *Gazeta Wyborcza*, "the biggest" newspaper that remains critical of the government has been the main target of government lawsuits, with the International Press Institute noting in December 2019 that "around 50 criminal and civil cases have been brought against it by state or state-controlled entities." This was one of the reasons why in 2020 Poland has fallen to its lowest ever position in the World Press Freedom Index (Tilles, 2020). However, because of this strong governmental influence, the Russia-supported spread of

hoaxes is much weaker in Hungary and Poland than in the rest of the region since the state-owned national channels (in Hungary it is the pro-government KESMA, while in Poland it is the national broadcaster TVP) are the ones that are filling in for this role. Therefore, while foreign interventions and the power of the business sector are not such impactful threats in these two countries, this does not take away from the polarization of media present in them.

Despite the apparent nature of these issues, steps have been made in the right direction. For example, in 2017, the Czech government announced a plan to create the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats. This task force now plays a role in debunking fake news (Schultheis, 2017). However, opponents state that this force is simply a measure of government censorship. While this was a step in the right direction, any policy decision regarding regulating media or state intervention into fake news must emphasize media independence. Despite these steps against fake and polarized news, few efforts have been made to strengthen independent media.

In order to properly understand the effect of media polarization on democracy in the Visegrad countries, a theoretical discussion of media is required. A major factor behind the growth of fake news, right-wing websites, and polarization is the “hostile media effect.” The hostile media effect posits that individuals with strong preconceived opinions on a particular issue are likely to perceive media outlets as biased against their position. Since this may lead to a negative perception of mainstream media over time, it explains why certain groups of citizens are increasingly turning to sites such as *Parlamentní listy* (Czechia), *Zem a Vek* (Slovakia), or *Origo* (Hungary) as their primary news source (Morris, 2007). Moreover, numerous studies showcase that the use of right-wing media sources as a primary source of information for a voter is significantly associated with higher tendencies to believe in negative stereotypes of left-leaning leaders and to reject negative stereotypes of right-leaning leaders (Morris, 2007). Thus, it is evident that the polarization of the media is leading to a division in the Czech Republic between ideologies on the left and right. This difference is then exacerbated by the continuous rift in what news is covered and to what degree the presentation of the news is biased from their respective channel.

As Sam Rosenfeld points out in his book *The Polarizers*, the advent of modern media, specifically television, “hampered parties’ ability to prescribe voting choices” (Rosenfeld, 2018). Prior to this new form of media, parties relied on patronage networks to spread information and garner votes. Now, new forms of media destabilized traditional patterns of campaigning and educating voters. While counter-arguments may cite that rational expectation theories posit that on average voters filter out bias without being persuaded, some argues, on the basis of numerous behavioral and social theories that voters are subject to media persuasion (DellaVigna). The existence of polarized media, where certain social media or TV

channels cater to a certain ideology, harms democracy in Visegrad countries due to the increased feeling of separation and demonization between the supporters of major political parties.

The American author, journalist, and political commentator Bill Bishop claims that people have been “sorting” themselves into homogeneous communities and neighborhoods (Bishop&Cushing, 2009). The general trend in all V4 countries is that the more liberal citizens tend to move into capitals and other larger cities (for instance, Warsaw, Krakow, or Wroclaw in Poland and Bratislava, Košice in Slovakia), while more conservative citizens tend to only associate with conservative friends. Bishop shows how an increasing percentage of voters live in highly polarized and politically segregated communities. This phenomenon is seen on social media and in the viewers of certain cable news programs. When only one ideology follows a cable news or social media channel, or when a channel aims to target a specific ideology, polarization, and the concept of “sorting” occurs. Similar to how liberal voters will feel more comfortable moving to the city, liberal voters only join media platforms like other people with similar political opinions. This is further supported by the fact that social media algorithms and targeted advertisements are likely to perpetuate these “opinion bubbles”, as they only refer users to groups and posts they are likely to agree with.

In addition to Bill Bishop’s concept of the “Big Sort,” Harvard professor Robert Putnam’s theory of social capital from his book “Bowling Alone” is helpful in contextualizing the rise and grand scope of the polarized media’s impact on democracy. Successful and productive democratic community building requires citizens to serve and strengthen the civic bonds of their community (Putnam, 2000). However, the polarization of the media has weakened the building of these civic bonds. Putnam argues that this isolation from other citizens limits community engagement, and thus productive intermingling and civic discourse among people. For example, Putnam showcases that groups supporting public schooling have seen a decline since the 1980s, both harming civic thought in public school systems and limiting interactions between students, parents, and teachers of different ideologies. Putnam posits that this social alienation and isolation shows the downfall of democratic building, which contributes to fewer interactions among different social, ethnic, and political groups (Putnam, 2000). He also distinguishes between two types of community-building: the creation of “bonding capital” among people of the same age, race, gender, etc., and “bridging capital” among people who belong to different social categories than you. The way this can be tied back to the V4 countries is that while the relative freedom of expression for the press, as well as citizens, allows the facilitation of the former type, the polarization of media causes that there is a lack of constructive discourse between people with different ideologies and backgrounds. This further supports the alienation and polarization among groups that do not share as many commonalities.

In order to strengthen independent media and counteract the effects of a polarized media, there can be a few steps done. First, increased government regulation and surveillance of television, Facebook, social media, and talk shows is necessary. In order to limit the influence of companies who pay for advertisements and to curtail fake news, government intervention is warranted. For example, in France and Spain, governments have removed advertising from public TV stations. This regulation has thus diminished the impact of commercial bias on their content (Fabrizio&Ellman, 2009). However, this highlights the crux of the previously mentioned paradox, as government regulation acts as a method that ensures the independence of media from other actors, including political representatives. Thus it is important that this intervention only happens in regards to helping media not be dependent on the income from advertisements which is the reality for the majority of media outlets in the status quo.

Moreover, the federal governments of Visegrad countries could allocate public funding for an informative and unbiased media source as a public good (Fabrizio&Ellman, 2009). This funding could go toward independent journalism programs and promoting local news stations and newspapers. Instead, the government is supporting biased media through continuing to permit politicians to have immense influence over prominent media sources. While in 2016 the Czech government banned political representatives from operating radio stations, TV outlets, and publishing newspapers, this act failed to include Internet publications and new media platforms (Vojtchovska, 2017). This measure, alongside increased funding and grants for journalism and local news, will help strengthen independent media independent from politicians.

In addition to a more prominent public media source, a cooperative agreement between governments could provide funding for national campaigns to recognize bias and increase issue salience of polarization in news across countries. Education is a central issue to media polarization and the strengthening of independent media. Thus, in line with this, several steps can be taken. For instance, the civics, media, and technology class be required in public schooling in Visegrad countries. Since eliminating bias is hard, making people more aware of bias is a more feasible idea. This class could stress the importance of increasing dialogue among different groups and recognizing the bias of news media. However, there already are non-governmental initiatives that the government can encourage its citizens to take advantage of. For instance, we look at the initiative Demagog, a web portal has a national branch in Czechia, Poland, as well as Slovakia. This initiative extracts the claims made by politicians in the media and determines their validity, also providing a short analysis that justifies the result. This aims to simplify the process of finding true, objectively reported information for the public. Moreover, the International Debate Education Institution overarches the debating organizations that foster critical thinking among the youth in Central Europe. Debating associations in these countries, such as Slovenská Debatná Asociácia in Slovakia, Asociace Debatních Klubů in

Czechia, or Polska Debatuje in Poland organize national and international workshops and tournaments in competitive debating and thus advance the argumentative, research, and presentational skills of their members. Moreover, they teach the participants to consider both sides of the topics discussed and force them to advocate for positions they might not agree with. Their greater goal is to improve their sense of responsibility as citizens and help them become informed and active members of the civil society since this is yet another important stakeholder that can help journalists maintain independence, as seen on the protests in Slovakia after Ján Kuciak's murder. Therefore, by encouraging initiatives that increase dialogue and awareness of the public, we can decrease the spread of hoaxes and biased reporting that remains unnoticed and unchallenged. However, the other significant way in which the civil-society and its non-governmental initiatives can support the independence of media is through direct financial support. There are many formats this can take, for instance, through subscription-based models with paywalls, crowdfunding or grants. The Slovak Denník N was similarly established by journalists who left the daily newspaper SME after the Slovak investment group Penta bought into it in 2015. By 2018 Denník N already claimed 30,000 subscribers and thus 75% of its income came from its readers (Struhárik, 2019). Despite the fact that "Gazeta" Wyborcza - the long-standing and established daily helped with the initial launch - the Polish investigative news web portal Oko.press now also gets most of its income from external grants and crowdfunding. Therefore, we see that the civil society can play a major role in ensuring the financial stability and independence from corporate influences. Moreover, in the political contexts where governments actively try to take independent outlets out of business, as seen in Poland or Hungary, the third sector can help by promoting them through awareness campaigns.

The benefits, that educating journalists, editors, and the regulatory bodies that serve as a check for their independence can bring, are one of the most important. Starting with the former group, the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Global Report 2017/2018 (UNESCO, 2018), suggests that there exists a significant societal demand for the professionalization of regulatory and media bodies. To address this demand and to follow the example of UNESCO facilitating this type of training for 5,000 judicial employees in Latin America (Alves). V4 governments could provide educational support for lawyers and judges who are a part of regulatory bodies that ensure the freedom of press and set the guidelines to enable it. In line with this, the governments could encourage the journalists themselves to participate in the existing distance learning programs, such as the BBC Academy which could give them insights into how to report objectively and maintain independence from external influence. Likewise, they could try to co-organize international or regional conferences and summer schools where journalists could exchange their good practice and present how they have been tackling the issue of corporate and governmental influences on their work. Lastly, while this step cannot

be proactively started by the governments, as that would go against its whole purpose, journalists should not be prevented from joining unions and press councils/committees that help them to gain the power to lobby institutions and fight against corporate influences in their own newsrooms. They can then use this platform to organize strikes against the owners of media groups and be supported with concentrated legal support for particular issues they are trying to solve. The combination of these policies is likely to give journalists and the employees from the judicial sector who support them by creating legal frameworks and guidelines for their work a good setting for having the capacity to make autonomous decisions.

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Géza Tokár:

# Movements and Journalists – The Role of the Media in Slovak Structural Changes

## Introduction

Slovakia is a landlocked European country with a population of around 5,45 million, Freedom House defines the state as a consolidated democracy (Učeň, 2018). The country gained its independence in 1993 after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. After a turbulent half-decade and the fall of Vladimir Mečiar's regime in 1998 Slovakia integrated into European structures and became the core member of the European Union, the NATO and taking part in regional forms of cooperation as well, like the Visegrád Group.

The post-communist transformation to liberal democracy was not linear, Slovakia experienced several shifts of power between various ideological groups. The anti-communist leaders of the Velvet Revolution were replaced with Vladimir Mečiar's authoritarian HZDS, which lost the 1998 elections to the democratic, cross-ideological opposition. The following government of Mikuláš Dzurinda profiled itself as a cooperation of liberals and Christian democrats and was followed in power by the leftist-populist Smer providing a central conflict in the Slovak political space (Deegan-Krause, 2012). The scandals connected with the elite's involvement in corruption-related issues caused further shift in political dynamics. The parliamentary elections of 2020 resulted in a breakthrough for right-wing populist movements with a strong anti-corruption agenda (Mesežnikov, 2020). The political landscape of the country during the last decade was shaped by mass protests, parties and personalities, which were not directly linked to social origins and high levels of institutionalization (Rybář and Spáč, 2019, Klíma, 2020). The media was also playing a crucial role in recent changes as the main contributor of news sources. This was also possible due to the pluralistic, ideologically diverse media environment with various interest groups in the background – there is no existing open political support for some political parties or political movements among the major media (Sirotnikova, 2019).

The purpose of the study is to explain and describe the structure of the Slovak media while making an attempt to identify and elaborate the role of the media involvement in aforementioned structural changes. Taking into consideration the most recent political developments in Slovakia the media handling of two cases will be specifically mentioned and compared. Both of them are directly connected to mass protests demanding structural reforms and the change of the elite: the Gorilla-protests from 2011-2012 and the mass movements formed as a reaction to the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová in 2018. In both cases the press was actively participating in distributing the news and forming an agenda, beyond its traditional,

watchdog-like role (Školkay, 2018). It is also possible to monitor, whether certain element of the media was captured by the state and instead of impartial reporting provided biased news.

## The Landscape of the Slovak Media – Pluralism and Frontline Struggles

The Slovak media is a pluralistic environment with numerous, differently oriented market players. Multitude of companies is active in the field of press agencies, daily and monthly newspapers, magazines, broadcasts, televisions, while certain overlaps are present in the ownership structures. Despite the representation of various interest groups, changes during the last decade indicate that the conditions of the Slovak media are worsening and the environment is facing numerous risks (Media Pluralism Monitor, 2020).

The press news services are provided by two agencies which are working for several decades. The TASR (News Agency of the Slovak Republic) was founded in 1992 and its status is guaranteed by law as a national independent institution providing public service, not subsidized by the state. The SITA (Slovak News Agency) is providing its services since 1997 as a private provider. The majority of the media has simultaneous news access to both sources, which guarantees the plurality of information sources and forces competition between the two agencies.

Regarding the market of daily newspapers, the leading market players are two tabloids: *Nový čas* and *Plus 1 deň*. None of the tabloids are following a visible political agenda. The most popular daily newspapers focusing mainly on political issues are the liberal *Sme* and the more left-wing oriented *Pravda*, the printed version of liberal *Denník N* is also present on the market. *Hospodárske noviny* is focused on economic issues, while *Korzar* is a regional newspaper oriented on Eastern Slovakia. *Új Szó* is the only daily printed in Hungarian language (Hungarians are the largest ethnic minority in Slovakia consisting 8,5% of the total population).

Several weeklies and by-weekly magazines are focusing on social and political issues. The main profile of the weekly *Trend* is economics, *.tyzden* is associated with liberal-conservative trends. Several newspaper's target group is the alternative populist right-wing audience, such as *Extra Plus* and *Zem a Vek*.

Most popular newspapers in Slovakia	
Daily newspapers	Circulation
Nový čas	57,800
Plus 1 deň	33,100
Sme	19,300
Pravda	15,500+ (estimated)
Hospodárske noviny	14,800
Korzár	7,800
Új Szó	17,800
Denník N	3,000 (estimated)
Other media	
Trend	9,200
.týždeň	7,000 (estimated)
Extra plus	5,000 (estimated)
Zem a vek	10,000 (estimated)

TTable 1 Most popular newspapers in Slovakia

Source: abcsr.sk monitoring <http://www.abcsr.sk/aktualne-vysledky/aktualne-vysledky>, June 2020

The Slovak environment of news portals is not exclusively dominated by the internet divisions of newspapers and other media products. The leading market player, aktualny.sk provides a wide portfolio of lifestyle, political and economic sites. The tabloid online topky.sk, pluska.sk and cas.sk are among the most popular sites, while the dailies Sme, Pravda and Hospodárske noviny are maintaining strong online presence. The trendsetter Denník N is also mainly present on the web. During the last few years several portals connected with hoaxes and fake news gained on popularity, such as Hlavné Správy and Zem a Vek.

Most popular web portals in Slovakia	
Web portals	Daily page views
Aktuality.sk	865,000
Sme.sk	681,000
Topky.sk	667,000
Cas.sk	642,000
Zoznam.sk	534,000
Pluska.sk	504,000
Pravda.sk	357,000
Hnonline.sk	309,000
Markíza.sk	289,000
Denníkn.sk	260,000
Hlavnespravdy.sk	130,000+ (estimated)

Table 2 Most popular web portals in Slovakia

Source: based on monitoring <http://www.abcsr.sk/aktualne-vysledky/aktualne-vysledky>, June 2020

The television market of Slovakia is dominated by two private, commercial televisions: JOJ TV and Markíza. The state is present on the market through several channels of RTVS (Jednotka, Dvojka), which is a nationwide public broadcasting, state-funded organization in Slovakia. TA3 is the only channel focusing on prime time news service.

Most popular television channels in Slovakia	
Channel (affiliation)	Monthly followers in percentage of the population
Markíza	21,64
JOJ	21,31
Jednotka (RTVS)	12,17
Doma (Markíza)	4,39
Wau (JOJ)	3,13
Plus (JOJ)	2,94
Dajto (Markíza)	2,85
Dvojka (RTVS)	1,91
TA3	0,92

Table 3 Most popular television channels in Slovakia

Source: <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/144146/sledovanost-stanic-v-sr-ktora-televizia-je-najuspesnejsia/>  
PMT/Kantar peoplemeter, 2019 November

Broadcasting is an area in which commercial channels and the state-owned RTVS are both present. The broadcasting market is a plural environment with several strong players while none of the radio stations is following a visible political agenda.

Most popular radio channels in Slovakia	
Channel (affiliation)	Monthly audience in share of population percentage
Rádio Expres	33,6
Rádio Slovensko (RTVS)	25,3
Fun rádio	23,2
Rádio Europa 2	16,3
Rádio Vlna	15,4
Rádio Jemné	15,0
Rádio Regina (RTVS)	12,0

Table 4 Most popular radio channels in Slovakia

Source: Median <https://strategie.hnonline.sk/media/2120194-najpocuvanejsou-rozhlasovou-stanicou-je-stale-radio-expres>

The major regulatory body for content regulation is the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission, which is also in charge of licensing, with some shared competencies with the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal Services (formerly the Telecommunication Office). Regarding self-regulation, the most important and longest standing authority is the Slovak Advertising Standards Council. Main industry coordinator in the policy field is the Creative Industry Forum. Ethics in journalism are overseen via self-regulation by the Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic. Media market is regulated only by the general competition laws with no standing monitoring mechanism in place (Sampor, 2016).

## The Political Environment and the Slovak Media

Since the Velvet Revolution media-related issues shaped the political environment in Czechoslovakia and later in Slovakia. The centralized, state-controlled structures were facing competition from new media products in private ownership. Forming a liberal, pluralistic environment in a post-communist, transforming society created several issues regarding the media.

The most notorious conflict in the nineties emerged between the daily broadsheet *Sme* and Vladimír Mečiar's authoritarian-nationalistic government. *Sme*, as the successor of popular daily *Smena* after 1993 quickly became the most selling newspaper focusing on political issues. Due to its position *Sme* acted as the voice of Mečiar's opposition, the conflict escalated in 1995 when several publishers denied pressing the daily in fear of political consequences. As a result, *Sme* was forced to move the printing operations from Bratislava and later secured a press machine for its own purposes. Mečiar's regime similarly attacked the most popular commercial television during the nineties, the private-owned Markíza. The seat of the television was occupied by the employees of a security company due to its alleged debts one month before the decisive parliamentary election in 1998, however protesters and politicians were protecting the building from the invaders. The defeat of Vladimír Mečiar's party, the HZDS was partially inflicted with public outrage and the perception that the regime is trying to take the company. Later on, the chairman of the television, Pavol Rusko pursued career in politics as a president of the liberal ANO party and he is connected with numerous corruption scandals.

During the first and second Dzurinda's government (1998-2006) the media landscape of Slovakia remained relatively intact. Despite his initial favorable reputation, the former prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda got into conflict with numerous journalists including the daily *Sme* accusing them of undermining the government. The aversion between Dzurinda and the media resulted in an editor-in-chief change in *Sme*, Slovakia's leading daily. Milan Šimečka left his position due to the "lack of support" from the newspaper's publisher, the Slovak-German Petit Press.

Tensions between the press and politics rose after 2006, during the first Fico's government. The nationalist-populist coalition of the Smer, SNS, and HZDS imposed the controversial Press Act in 2008. The main focus of press criticism was connected with the mandatory right of reply and correction. On May 27, 2008 the majority of Slovak dailies were published with a blank front page and a short statement connected with the concerns regarding the new Press Code. The law was subsequently changed three years later by Ivetta Radičová's government, while the right to reply was reintroduced in 2019, again by Robert Fico's third government. Robert Fico's confrontational style, frequent accusations of the media, and personal attacks on journalists further polarized the relations between the Slovak media and the government.

Another change happened in 2011 when the public service broadcasting underwent institutional reforms due to financial reasons. The Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) was formed as a nationwide public broadcasting, state-funded organization by the merger of the Slovak Television and the Slovak Radio. The organizational change was explained with the economical inefficiency of the two media units.

2011 saw an implementation of an innovative tool in the Slovak digital media market: the introduction of a nationwide paywall managed by Piano Media. Nine news sites were participating in the project creating a joint, managed platform of locked articles which was available for the readers for a monthly flat fee. The joint platform was available until 2016, after its dissolution most of the participating sites created their own platforms for paid content. The Slovak online media was the first in the region to apply a general solution to gain paid subscribers. Due to the existence of the Piano, paid and locked content is present on the majority of the news sites, providing additional income and indirectly strengthening the financial independence of the websites.

During the last decade various interest groups stepped in the Slovak media market, the most well-known of them are the Penta Group and the J&T investment group. Both influential corporations are maintaining a wide portfolio of investments including healthcare, real estate, and financial services. The primary field of interest of the J&T is the television (as the current owner of the) Joj Media House. Penta invested mostly in printed media through News and Media Holding, which is the publisher of influential tabloids and monthlies such as Plus jeden deň, Plus 7 dní, Trend or Emma. In 2014 Penta, already heavily accused with the Gorilla-case took over 45 percent of the shares of daily Sme, which caused conflicts within the editorial staff. The transaction resulted in the abdication of editor in chief Matúš Kostolný and the departure of journalists who founded Project N/Denník N with the aid of private company ESET. Denník N is also present as a daily newspaper, expanding to the Czech Republic, and it is considered as an example of a successful transition in the field of independent media. The budget is heavily relying on the paid content, additional economic activities and crowd funding. Several influential members of the current political elite are heavily involved in media activities in the past: new

parliamentary chair Boris Kollár is the chairman of commercial station Fun Rádio, while Prime Minister Igor Matovič founded regionPRESS, the biggest regional publishing house.

Leading players in the field of printed media				
Company	Dailies	Weeklies	Monthlies	Portals
News and Media Holding	Plus jeden den, Új Szó	Plus 7 dní, Trend, Vasárnap	EVA	Pluska.sk, trend.sk, mediálne.sk, ujszo.com, trend.sk
Ringier Axel Springer				Azet.sk, actuality.sk, sport.sk, pokec.sk
FDP Media	Novy cas			Cas.sk
Zoznam.sk				Zoznam.sk, topky.sk
Petit Press	SME	The Slovak Spectator	Profit	Sme.sk
Slovakia	noviny			
Perex	Pravda			Pravda.sk
N Press	Denník N		N magazín	Dennikn.sk

Table 5 Leading players in the field of printed media  
Source: <https://cloudia.hnonline.sk/rxn/ed51155ef187149c0b4e91205545fb46>

## Risks and the State of Media in Slovakia

External analysts identify several risks connected with the current state of the Slovak media. Ján Kuciak's murder in 2018 showed the brutal methods of oligarchs trying to influence the media workers, offenses against journalists, illegal spying with the inclusion of state authorities, paid officers, assassination, sending empty bullets and numerous other methods were reported.

According to the The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom the lack of transparency in media ownership resulted in high risk level in the area of market plurality and causing medium risk in the fields of social inclusiveness and political independence. Low risk in the field of basic protection is mainly due to application of the constitutionally

enshrined freedom of expression and protection of right to information exercised via long standing Freedom of Information Act. However, even this area is border-line medium risk due to the Kuciak murder (Sampor, 2020, SGI 2018).

The Freedom House in 2020 is emphasizing the impact of the murder of Ján Kuciak on the society and points out that the investigation revealed a close link between Marian Kočner, the controversial businessman and key political and judicial figures, including judges and the former prosecutor-general. The businessman also had around three dozen journalists placed under surveillance, using personal data from police databases. Another threat is former Prime Minister Robert Fico, who along with his colleagues often attack journalists verbally, using an anti-media rhetoric that is reproduced in certain media and, above all on websites specializing in disinformation. In 2019, the biggest Slovak TV channel, Markíza, was bought by an investment group controlled by Petr Kellner, one of the wealthiest Czech businessmen. The independence and professionalism of the public radio and TV broadcaster RTVS has been questioned since several dozen of its journalists left in 2018 because the new management was close to the ultranationalist SNS party. They have been replaced by younger, less experienced journalists, some apparently sympathetic to SNS leader Andrej Danko (Meseznikov, Kollár, Bútorá 2014).

According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index Slovakia is ranked 33rd in the world, which is an improvement over 2019 (35th). The global score of the media however declined by 0.91 points since 2019. In general, the state of the Slovak media considered to worsen since 2016, when the country was ranked 12th in the worldwide comparison.

## Scandals, Society and Media Involvement

### The Gorilla scandal

The Gorilla scandal is the biggest scandal connected to political corruption named after the wiretap files of the SIS, the Slovak Secret Service. The records were made in 2005-2006 and subsequently leaked to the internet in December 2011 as a written transcript. The authenticity of the tapes lacks official confirmation, the majority of the records consists of alleged conversations between Jaroslav Haščák, co-owner of the Penta Group and various politicians, officials and business executives. The tapes were published in entirety in 2019.

The leaked transcripts caused nationwide protests in Slovakia and heavily influenced the results of the 2012 parliamentary elections (Spáč, 2014). The protests were ongoing from January 2012 until March 2012 including mass-demonstrations with several thousand participants and small, rather violent gatherings. Throwing bananas, corruption-related claims in a scandal, which overlapped traditional political cleavages indirectly caused the rise of new political elites not involved in the political settlements born before 2010.

The role of the media in presenting the scandal was controversial. Several pieces of the tapes were already accessed by various journalists for years, notably Tom Nicholson (SME), who received the documents from a former agent of the Slovak secret service (SIS). The transcripts suggested widespread corruption and protectionism within the state structures and oligarchs during the last years of Mikuláš Dzurinda's second government. However, before the document was leaked to the public in December the media was unwilling to publish parts of the transcripts due to the lack of proofs about the authenticity of the documents. The participants involved in the scandal claimed the transcripts were falsified, changed, or taken out of context.

The case illustrates an ethical and legal dilemma for the media when the sources of information vehemently deny all accusations, and force the media to report rumors or contradictory claims and denials (after files are made public on the internet) or desist from reporting altogether due to possible libel threats, until the files are made public on the internet (Školkay, 2018).

Nevertheless, the media was heavily involved in promoting and interpreting the findings of the tapes. The level of enthusiasm regarding the ongoing investigation was differing: the most detailed coverage was provided by the daily Sme. This was partially caused by the fact that Tom Nicholson, who contacted and partially processed the transcripts was previously working as an editor of the daily. Nicholson in 2012 published the first book about the case and became the face of the mass protests. The journalist endorsed the participants of the protests to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

In addition it is worth noting that the majority of the scandals involved in Gorila affected the second Dzurinda government and the former PM had notoriously bad relations with the Sme due to several other corruption scandals and their interpretation. On the other hand, Pravda, the second most popular daily with center-left orientation and a different ideological background according to the same studies provided less articles about the case, with less objectivity. This can be explained with change of ownership in 2010 and the ambition to avoid doing any harm to Smer-SD, which was indirectly also involved in the scandal. This is being seen as an example of partial media capture, which suggests that in specific situations a part of a media sector is not able to report freely about an issue (Školkay, 2018).

### **The murder of Ján Kuciak**

Ján Kuciak was an investigative journalist working for aktualny.sk, his main field of expertise was tax fraud. During his work he frequently clashed with influential businessmen due to his articles. The investigative journalist and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were killed in February 2018 by gunshot wounds in their home which made him the first murdered journalist in the history of independent Slovakia.

The murder shocked Slovakia and resulted in mass protests and demonstrations against the political elite. Kuciak's death led to the biggest mass protests in the country since the Velvet Revolution, in 9th of March 2018 more than 120 thousand people participated in the protests in various Slovak cities. The movement For a decent Slovakia (Za slušné Slovensko) became an issue setter organization during the first half of 2018, besides activists and politicians journalists were also frequently participating on the meetings as speakers.

In contrast to the Gorilla-protests, the actions of the protesters had political consequences. The unrest culminated in the abdication of Prime Minister Robert Fico and the transformation of the Slovak government. Despite the initial skepticism due to the relatively effective police investigation numerous suspects were arrested on September 2019 and three persons were charged with murder. Further in line with the investigation, businessman Marian Kočner and Alena Zsuzsová were accused of orchestration of the murder, however in September 2020 both of them were acquitted of charges related to the murders. As an additional side effect new parties gained popularity and the Smer lost the next parliamentary election in 2020 – Igor Matovič's government's primary priority is fighting against the corruption.

The incident affected the media as well, partially due to the fact that the majority of media felt threatened by influential businessmen with connections to organized crime. As a result of acknowledging the need for networking and providing information about corruption the Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK) was born as a platform for investigative journalism. In addition the US Embassy in Slovakia renamed its annual Transparency Award to Ján Kuciak Memorial Transparency Award.

Personal involvement of numerous journalists in the case resulted in changing the role of journalism in the society. The media replaced, in part, state authorities in enforcing justice in special cases of collusion involving some quasi-business persons and politicians, political parties and public authorities. In other words, some journalists and media acted as independent agents of justice within a framework of what appeared to be a partially captured state. (Školay, 2018b). Thus, the Slovak environment in 2018 can be seen as a specific case of "mediacracy" a system, in which the media is capable of agenda setting independently of the government and the political elite and in addition draws attention to specific issues regardless the intention of the political elites. (Phillips, 1974)

## Conclusion – The Future of the Slovak Media: Mediocracy, Partial Media Capture or the Role of The Watchdogs?

As we have seen, the Slovak media played an active role during the greatest scandals of the last decade. Through the investigative articles, presentation of forbidden and leaked materials and participating in mass protests the activities of the media outgrew its traditional roles. Due to the instability of the Slovak party system, political plurality and the presence of numerous influential actors the media is able and willing to extend beyond its traditional watchdog-position. Looking into the future we can form several questions regarding the role of the Slovak media in further structural changes.

We can raise the question, whether the Slovak media is on its way a real mediocracy or its influence is rather a result of a political power vacuum? Can the media fight the partially captured state as an independent agent? Will the business interest group's partial media capture exploit the social status of the journalists?

The results of the 2020 parliamentary elections question the strong influence of the mainstream, trendsetter media on the Slovak society. While the Smer lost the election, the surprise winners of the voting are the parties and personalities which were not specifically favored by the influential dailies and news portals: Igor Matovič's OĽaNO and Boris Kollár's populist Sme rodina. In contrast, the liberal, PS-Spolu coalition with strong media presence failed to reach the threshold. Still, the relatively weak political positions of the current Slovak government prevent the state capture. Less optimistic is the prognosis regarding the financial companies and investors influence on content production. We can predict further exploitation of media capture: several editorial staffs have been partially replaced in the near future, most notoriously the staff of economic weekly Trend.

Nevertheless, the Slovak media played a positive, trendsetting role in 2012 and 2018. The political pluralism protects from total state capture, while it is guaranteed that numerous relatively independent, active media products will shape the political-social landscape of Slovakia during the next decade.

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