AN EXTREMIST OR PEOPLE'S CHOICE? MEDIA COVERAGE OF FAR RIGHT LEADER MARIAN KOTLEBA IN THE 2013 REGIONAL ELECTIONS

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When Marian Kotleba, the current leader of the People's Party Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS), ran in the 2009 elections to the Bodies of regional governments to become a governor of the Banská Bystrica region, he gained 10.03 per cent of the votes (13,629 in total). At that time, the only visible activities of the then-independent candidate were the television appearance during political debate on the public Slovak Television and the leader's poster campaign, which stated that "with your support, I can certainly eliminate unfair favouritism of not only Gypsy parasites against decent people"[1] (ĽSNS 2011). Several media had rather extensive coverage of his candidacy and linked him to his previous leadership of political movement Slovak Togetherness (Slovenská pospolitosť, SP).

Nevertheless, this was not the first time that Marian Kotleba was gaining the attention of the public through the media. In 2005, when he was the leader of SP and the political party Slovak Togetherness – Our party (Slovenská pospolitosť – národná strana, SP-NS), he organised several rallies in various towns across Slovakia and marched in uniforms that resembled the uniforms of the (war-time) Slovak state. The marches, publically usually marked as rallies of right-wing extremists or neo-Nazis, attracted significant media attention. After internal crisis following the party's dissolution,[1] subsequent party consolidation and Kotleba's success in the regional 2009 elections, the new party formed in 2010 and run in the following national elections. The party never got into the national parliament, but its electoral gains have been on the rise.

Although there were some indicators that might have predicted the results of the 2013 regional elections, Marian Kotleba's victory in the elections, when he became a governor of the Banská Bystrica region, did come to some observers as a surprise. The leader of the far right People's Party Our Slovakia won the election with 55.53 per cent of the vote (71,397 votes) in the second round against the incumbent Vladimír Maňka from the ruling Smer- Social Democracy party. Ever since the

launch of its predecessor, and the current People's Party Our Slovakia, the leader has been the most visible party representative in public. While at first the party tried to gain support in the public and attention of the media through glorifying the Slovak state and praising its president Jozef Tiso, as well as pointing the finger at the "Zionists", Americans, Hungarians, liberals, or homosexuals, recently they have been mobilizing support locally on the anti-Roma and anti-establishment sentiment. They have done this among other things, by organizing protests in areas with tense relations between Roma and non-Roma population. In 2010 and 2012 the party received the most votes primarily in those municipalities with Roma settlements and where the relations between two groups are objectively or subjectively problematic (Kluknavská 2013). The party's actions attracted rather wide media attention, especially since it focused on staging active protests in the problematic areas.

In most political discussions in general, and when it comes to far right parties in particular, a lot of power is ascribed to the mass media. Parties' representatives and parties' leaders must appear in the media in order to make themselves known to the electorate (Mazzoleni, Schulz 1999). When running in elections, far right parties usually depend on the media for their electoral breakthrough even more than established political parties (Mazzoleni et al. 2003). Far right parties cannot rely exclusively on reputation and therefore need the media to provide them with a stage where they can share their programme or ideas. It can also be argued that people who do not read a specific newspaper or watch a specific television program can still be influenced indirectly by means of interpersonal communication about the particular media article (Bos, Van der Brug, De Vreese 2010). The relationship between the media content and the electoral successes of far right parties has been in recent years highlighted in the works of several researchers (e.g. Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, 2007; Koopmans, Muis 2009). In addition, the media may contribute to the success of the far right by highlighting the parties and leaders within the media content, by creating a favourable ground when covering their themes or (simply) by presenting them in relation to the issues that are of importance to the public.

Apart from few protests and rallies organized by members of the People's Party Our Slovakia (before 2010 also by members of political movement Slovak Togetherness), the party lacks most other forms of mobilization due to the largely inexistent party organization. With few members and weak organizational structure, the far right party and its leader have to rely on the mass media in order to attract wider electoral support. Before the first round of 2013 regional elections, Marian Kotleba appealed to voters mostly through several local protests, riding the wave of the perceived Roma threat and abuse of power by mainstream politicians and the government, which were all supposed to have a negative effect on the well-being of the majority population. He built upon the political potential gained after 2009 regional elections and positioned himself in the role of the protector of "decent people," and at the time did attract some followers, but failed to gain significant media attention. However, the leader did participate in the television debate with other candidates for the governor office and several media news mentioned his candidacy. It must also be noted that despite his low media visibility, based on the political preferences of his party (around 1 – 1.5 per cent), he managed to appear in the media at least few times before the first round of the elections. Moreover, Kotleba and his party during recent years caught the media attention during their involvement in the

events that were of public concern, such as the burning down of Krásna Hôrka castle[1] in 2012, after which the party organised several rallies in the village and claimed to ("legally") tear down the ("illegal") Roma dwellings.

Although the party appeared in the media mostly thanks to local incidents that were turned into deeper "problems with Roma people," and the interest to report about Kotleba shortly before the elections was not particularly strong, the media attention for the far right leader radically changed after the results of the first round of the elections, when he gained 21.30 per cent (26,251 votes), ending up in the second place. Immediately after the election's first round, Kotleba's media presence significantly arose and the leader attracted a lot of attention in the public debate and the media. The media informed about the surprising results and the shock for the society noting that the right-wing extremist gained an unexpected public support. Some commentators or party's supporters perceived the rise of the media attention as a massive anti-campaign against the person of Kotleba in order to delegitimize him ahead of the second round of the elections. The debate about the media ethics and whether, when and how should the media inform about far right politician or how to talk about right-wing extremism in general in the media has also begun. Meanwhile, the prevalent voices in the media stressed that Kotleba very possibly does not stand a chance in the second round and presented the results as an anomaly. Kotleba's visibility after the second round, when he became the governor of the region, was even higher – this

was, however, to be expected since in the public debate the results were received with even greater shock and surprise than the results of the first round.

In spite of the supposed negative tone of the coverage and thanks to wide media attention, the far right leader was immediately after the first round of the elections linked to the so-called Roma issue and anti-government attitudes. The question we will raise is thus not only about the saliency of the far right leader in the media or the tone of the media reporting, but specifically about the content of the coverage. Although the estimation of the effects of the media coverage on the political outcomes would require longitudinal analysis, with the discursive examination of the short period spanning the elections, we are able to look at the attitudes of the media concerning far right actors and link it to the electoral gains in particular elections. In such a case, we must analyse how the media framed and shaped the discourse regarding Kotleba before and during the regional elections.

In the analysis we follow ten major media outlets, covering the print, electronic and internet-based media: four daily newspapers (two tabloids Nový čas, Plus 1 Deň, and two daily newspapers SME, Pravda), four TV stations (three private stations TV Markíza, TV JOJ, TA3, and one public broadcaster RTVS), and two web news portals (Aktuality.sk, Topky.sk). We will focus on a six-week period between 17 October 2013 and 30 November 2013, thus focusing on the three weeks prior to the first round of the elections, two weeks between the first and the second round, and a week after the second round. We build upon the qualitative frame analysis, using discursive techniques, analysing underlying structures behind the text, and quantifiable measures, as well as determining the leader's visibility in the

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[1] The police announced that the fire had been caused by two local Roma boys, aged 11 and 12, while lighting cigarettes. The ĽSNS framed the situation as a consequence of the inadaptable way of life of the Roma living in the settlement despite the fact that the boys who reportedly caused the fire did not actually live in the settlement, but in the village among the "white" majority.

media and use of the different frames throughout the elections.

We expect the media coverage to be of negative tone, with prevalent frame putting an emphasis on the extreme or extremist nature of Kotleba's candidacy. However, we also expect the media to focus on other aspects of the elections and far right leader's results; the media will presumably also point to the electoral outcome as a result of the protest of (ordinary) people, as a shock for the society, as a surprising (or deviant) element in the election turnout, or as a failure of the authorities in preventing the rise of right-wing extremism and a consequence of politicians' behaviour leading to the deprivation of society. In addition to different forms of frames, we will also look at specific labels and naming associated with Kotleba, which throughout the elections ranged from neo-Nazi, right-wing extremist, far right leader to radical politician, controversial nationalist from Banská Bystrica and a 36-year-old IT specialist. The paper aims to contribute to the literature on the representation of the far right actors in mass media in Central and Eastern Europe.

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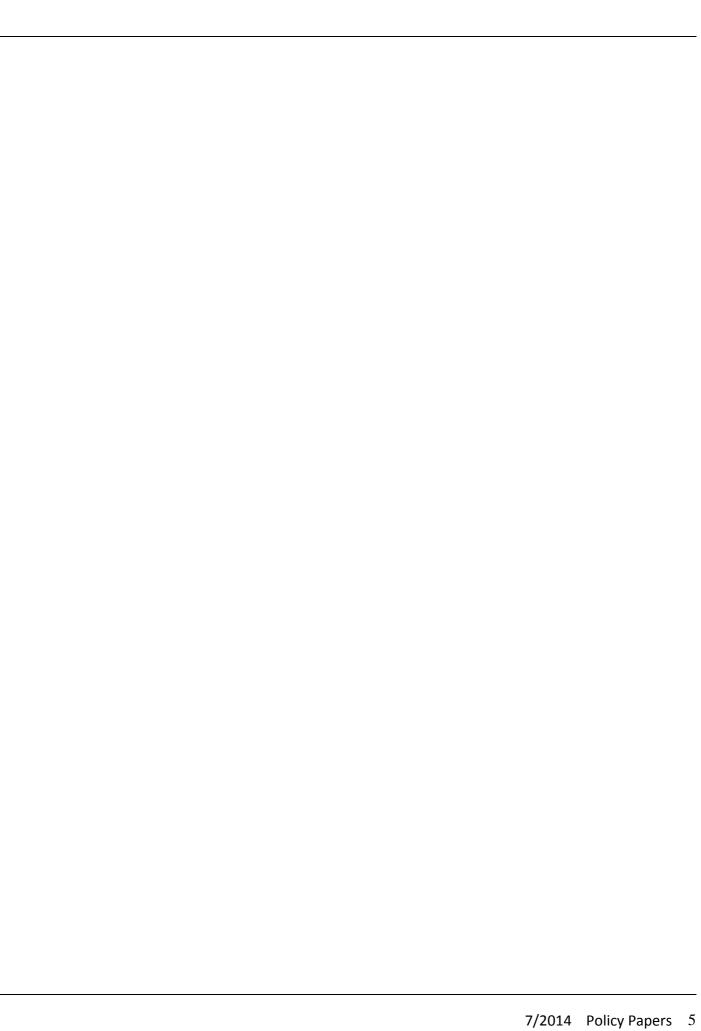
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No. 7/2014, Vol. 3

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