



REPORT ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF SLOVAK POLITICS

***Week One: July 13, 1998 through July 19, 1998
Released on July 23, 1998***

MEMO'98 is an independent and non-partisan effort -- formed by the Helsinki Citizens Assembly and the Association for Support of Local Democracy -- to systematically monitor the media coverage of the Slovak parliamentary elections scheduled for September 25 and 26, 1998. MEMO98's findings are offered not to support any one candidate or political party. By following a well-defined and rigorous methodology, MEMO98 seeks to present information that helps the Slovak public gain information it needs to make the well-informed choices demanded of citizens in a democratic society.

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Mass media's crucial role of offering citizens information they need to make well-informed choices in their lives is most clearly demonstrated during elections. People often decide their vote on what they learn from the mass media.

What the media reports, then, is an important part of the electoral landscape. Balance and fairness of media coverage of political parties, candidates, and issues is an important part of the level playing field required for genuinely free elections. While all media should offer responsible and fair coverage, it is especially incumbent upon state media, which is financed by all of a country's citizens, to provide unbiased coverage.

After one week of monitoring news broadcasts on the two major television stations and the two major radio stations, MEMO'98 found a wide difference in the type of news presented by different outlets as well as major differences in the ways that major political entities are portrayed.

Following is the first of weekly reports that MEMO'98 will issue through the September elections. In coming weeks, MEMO'98 will expand the scope of this project by monitoring major national newspapers including Novy Cas, Pravda, Prace, Sme and Slovenska Republika.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Fully 39% of the time devoted to politically significant stories on STV news last week was devoted to the incumbent government with another 30% dedicated to HzDS. Coverage of political parties not part of the ruling coalition totaled only 12.2% of the relevant news coverage.
- STV tended, last week, to portray the incumbent government and ruling coalitions in a positive light and opposition parties in a negative light. They also frequently neglected to air contrary views.
- TV Markiza offered 16% of their relevant news coverage to the HzDS and an additional 17% to government activities. Parties outside the ruling coalition received a total of 45% of total politically significant news coverage.
- TV Markiza offered generally negative portrayals of HzDS and the government and generally positive views of opposing parties, although there was more balance and a greater diversity of opinions offered.

After one week of monitoring, our data show that all Slovak broadcast media were not following the same rules of journalism. For the week beginning on July 13, 1998, STV offered significantly more coverage and more positive coverage to ruling powers than to opposition forces. More importantly, the frequent failure to include opposing views in stories relevant to Slovak voters is unusual. Additional data, to be collected by MEMO'98 in the coming weeks will reveal if this is a consistent trend or an anomaly.

Legal/Regulatory Framework for the Media

Article 26 of our Constitution guarantees Slovak citizens the right to accurate information. Other Slovak laws regulating television and radio obligate these media to provide balanced and accurate information (the law on radio and television: No. 468 of 1991, paragraph 4). In addition to this, international treaties adopted by the Slovak Republic, as well as the most basic international standards for human rights and civil liberties and professional journalistic ethics, demand a free and independent press which offers balanced, unbiased and accurate information on broadcast media.

Television Coverage

There is no doubt that viewers of Slovak Television news were offered dramatically different views of events than were viewers of TV Markiza during the week ending July 19, 1998. State television offered significantly more coverage of the government and ruling coalition parties than Markiza. Markiza, in turn, reported a great deal more on the SDK, and SOP than did STV. More important than the amount of coverage, however was the way that significant political parties and

government activities were portrayed.

STV consistently portrayed the Government, HZDS and SNS in a positive light while usually portraying SDK and SDL in a negative or neutral light. Markiza offers some positive and neutral coverage of the government and HZDS, but when not considered neutral, these presentations were most often negative. Positive views of SDK and SOP are the norm on Markiza.

There is also a difference in the balance within each story on these television stations. Markiza occasionally airs stories without offering a fair view of the other side, as they did in the following example:

- 18.7. 1998 – TV Markiza broadcast a story on an SDK pre-election event. SDK leader M. Dzurinda was presented in a positive light. This impression was emphasized by interviews with two HZDS supporters. The choice of these particular supporters - one of whom made an aggressive impression, and the other who seemed to be under the influence of alcohol - gave an unbalanced view.

STV even more often seems to present stories in a one-sided or unfair manner. Following are three examples from last week:

- 13.7.98 An opposition round table story. Opposition MP's were not offered the opportunity to express their opinions. The meeting was described exclusively by ruling coalition MP's.
- 15.7. 1998 The Minister of Work and Social Affairs, V. Tkac, accused SDK of intending to privatize the social security system and destroy the Social Insurance Company. SDK representatives were not offered an opportunity to express their opinions.
- 14.7. 1998 – STV released statistical data on unpaid debts for companies privatized under Mr. Carnogursky's, Mr. Moravcik's and two Meciar governments. STV offered confusing statistics without offering any related economic information. This story was repeated on July the 16th and 18th. In none of these broadcasts were opposition views presented.

Radio Coverage

Slovak Radio offers significantly more coverage of the government and the ruling coalition than does Radio Twist. Radio Twist offered much more coverage of SDK and SDL. While Slovak Radio usually portrays the government and HZDS in a positive light and Radio Twist more in a negative light, they both offer significant amounts of neutral or balanced coverage.

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of views offered to Slovaks by the different media. While this is not unusual in an open society, indeed it is laudable, there are early indications that not all media outlets follow the same standards of balance and fairness. It is too early to draw clear conclusions about the quality of coverage in individual outlets. Nevertheless, early data show that STV frequently neglected to offer Slovaks opposing views on particular stories. MEMO'98 will gather data throughout the pre-election period to determine if this is a consistent trend. We will also continue to examine Markiza, Slovak Radio, Radio Twist and expand our project to include five major newspapers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA MONITORING

By Pat Merloe

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in part that: "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections...." The will of the people of any country cannot be exercised unless voters make a free and informed choice among the political contestants. Today, most voters gain essential information concerning political contestants through the mass media. Proper media behavior toward all political parties and candidates therefore is crucial for a genuine democratic election.

In fact, the freedom of political contestants to present their views to prospective voters, the right of citizens to receive accurate and sufficient information about the political contestants and other matters relevant to elections and the right of the mass media to exercise freedom to gather and impart information combine in the election context. The role of the mass media in providing access for political contestants to present their messages and in presenting news about political parties, political leaders and matters of political import is vital to the integrity of the election process. Domestic and international election observers consider media behavior to be a central element in determining whether an election is "free and fair". Monitoring the media to gauge its behavior in light of internationally accepted standards and practices is an important part of election observation.

MEMO '98 is applying internationally accepted methods for media monitoring and should provide indispensable, impartial information about the nature of Slovakia's election process. This information will be used by Slovak citizens and the international community in evaluating the genuineness of the 1998 parliamentary elections. Reports from MEMO '98 should provide an accurate picture of media behavior toward the political contestants, both quantitatively and qualitatively. They should also provide benchmarks for citizens and observers to judge the fairness of the election process from now until the ballots are cast.

NDI and I personally have been pleased to be able to assist those involved in creating MEMO '98. They have demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm and dedication to the principles of nonpartisan election monitoring, in order to help ensure the integrity of the Slovak election process.

Patrick Merloe

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METHODS

By Thomas R. Lansner*, Adjunct Professor of International Media and Communications Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs

MEMO98 has adapted for use in Slovakia techniques used successfully in several countries around the world to monitor and report on election news coverage. Monitoring is being done by volunteers trained to perform quantitative and qualitative analyses of television and radio news broadcasts and of newspaper articles. To ensure consistency and quality of monitoring, at least two volunteers

monitor each news report, and results and analysis are reviewed by project advisors.

MEMO98 will monitor two television stations: Slovak TV and TV Markiza; two radio stations: Slovak Radio and Radio Twist; and five newspapers: Novy Cas, Praca, Pravda, Slovenska Republika, and Sme. These media outlets were chosen on the basis of a polling data regarding where Slovaks gain their political information and by consulting other survey research and circulation data.. Monitoring these country-wide outlets will provide a national picture of political coverage in Slovak media.

Monitoring regional newspapers and radio stations could also be useful, but would require significant additional local analysis and explanation, and is currently beyond the resources of this project.

Broadcast news is recorded and the amount of time parties and candidates receive is tabulated. These quantitative results are reported in the summary of findings following and depicted graphically in several charts. Newspaper coverage is analyzed quantitatively by the amount of space in square centimeters given to various candidates or parties, and by the number of times they are mentioned on the newspaper's front page.

Monitors will also assess whether news reports are positive or negative in their presentation of the person or party covered, and note media effects such as the images and language used in the coverage. Monitors are carefully instructed that it is the media outlet's coverage of the person or party, and not the content of the person or party's statements, that are being assessed. These qualitative observations are reported in a separate section of this report.

People interested in further explanation of MEMO98 methodology and procedures are invited to contact MEMO98.

*Prof. Lansner visited Bratislava in June to advise on launching of the MEMO98 project

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