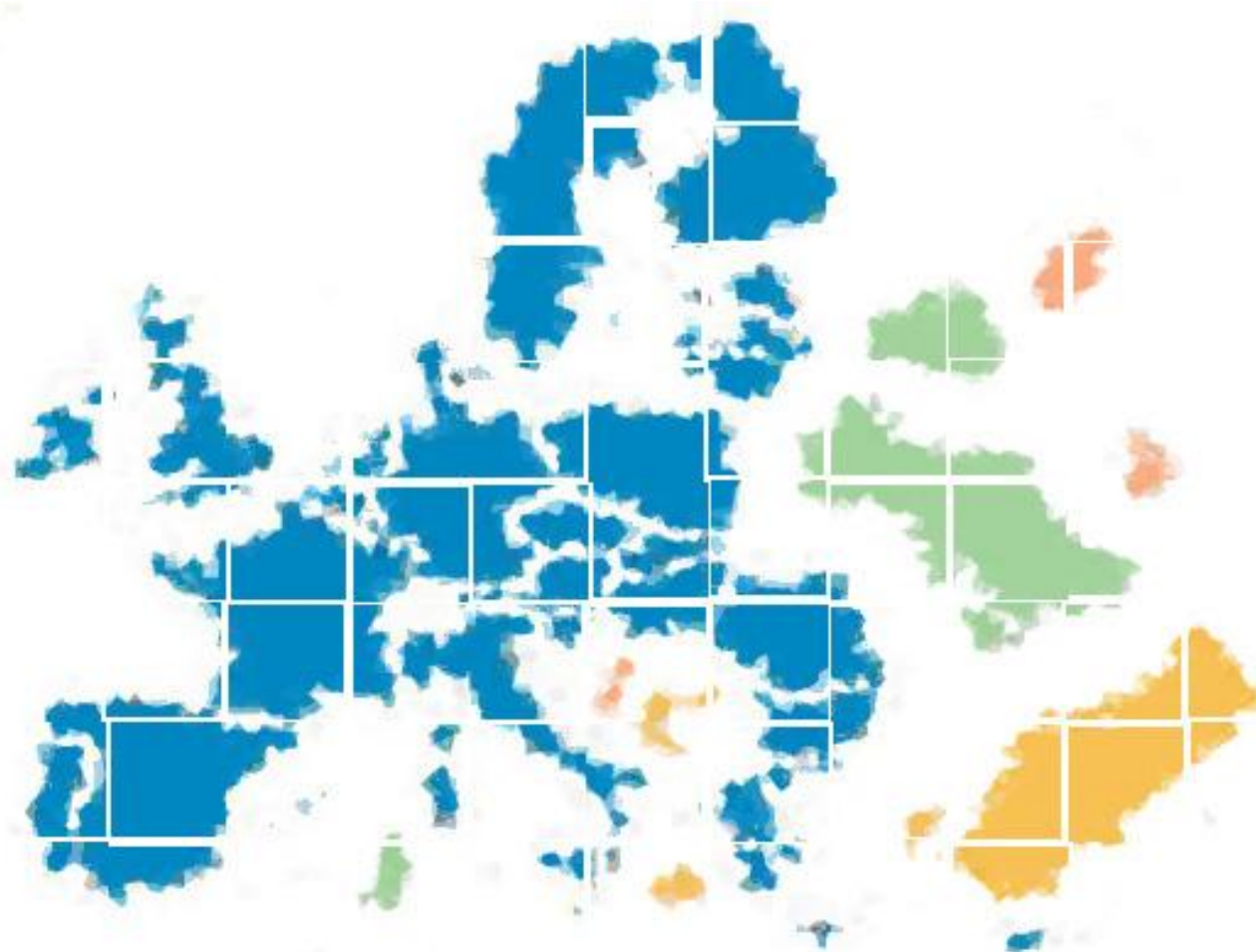


# *Frontiers of Democracy*

Media in Slovakia  
*Good and bad news*

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Martin M. Šimečka



## Center for European Neighborhood Studies

The Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) is an independent research center of the Central European University (CEU) located in Budapest, Hungary. Its main goal is to contribute to an informed international dialogue about the future of the European Union in the world, while capitalizing on its Central European perspective and regional embeddedness.

The strategic focus of the center is academic and policy-oriented research on the place and role of the European Union in its rapidly changing and increasingly volatile neighborhood. Through its research, CENS seeks to contribute to the understanding of the environment where the EU, its member states and partners need to (co)operate, and it aims at supporting the constructive development of these relations by providing opportunities for discussion and exchange. The center's geographic focus areas are Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Russia.

## Frontiers of Democracy

### *Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine*

Moldova and Ukraine, countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, are undergoing complex processes of democratic transformation, but with weak embeddedness of democratic values and principles drawbacks can occur. It is embeddedness that helps to overcome the challenges of transformation and pushes countries beyond mere frontiers of democracy towards becoming strongly committed democratic communities. The goal of the ["Frontiers of Democracy: Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine"](#) project of the CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies is to facilitate embedding democratic values in the societal ethos in Moldova and Ukraine by providing a forum for discussion of the difficulties of such a complex process and by drawing on the transition experience of the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).



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The opinions expressed here are those of the author.

## About the author

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### **Martin M. Šimečka**

Martin M. Šimečka is a Slovak author and journalist. He belongs to the few Slovak authors who published in the “samizdat literature” during communism. Šimečka’s novel, *The Year of the Frog*, has been translated into English, French and other languages. In 1990, he founded the independent publishing house, Archa. He later became editor-in-chief of *Domino-forum*, a Slovak weekly. From 1997 to 2006, he acted as editor-in-chief of *SME*, Slovakia's leading daily newspaper. From 2006 to 2008, he was editor-in-chief of *Respekt*, a well-known Czech weekly, and from 2009 on, he was editor and contributor. Since 2015, he is the head of the editorial board of *Dennik N*, a newly founded daily newspaper in Slovakia.

## Media in Slovakia

### *Good and bad news*

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There is not much good news about the media in Slovakia. The world crisis of newspapers broke in Slovakia a little later but with the strength of a storm. The circulation of daily newspapers started to decrease ten years ago, and current numbers are down to about one-third of those a decade ago. The case of the biggest quality paper of Slovakia, SME, is indicative: in 2006, its circulation reached 75,000 copies. In 2016, it is only about 28,000.

On the other hand, websites of Slovak quality newspapers experienced a jump in readership. While their readership in print is about 20% altogether, people following news websites amount to 60% of the population – and the variety of websites is growing.<sup>1</sup> The challenge for the websites to succeed is financial: advertisements did not switch from print to the websites as publishers hoped ten years ago, but went to Facebook or to Google.

The result of the declining profit and circulation is that foreign – mainly German – publishers withdrew from Slovakia (with the exception of tabloid papers where the main tabloid, *Nový čas* (New Time), is still owned by Ringier), and new domestic owners have bought the biggest stakes in the Slovak press.

This development is a direct threat to the freedom of media in Slovakia, especially in the case of the ownership of the dailies SME and *Plus jeden deň* (Plus one day), the weekly *Plus sedem dní* (Plus seven days), the economical weekly *Trend* as well as regional press. The new owner is a group of businessmen formed around one of the biggest companies of the country, Penta, which has a very bad reputation in Slovakia being one of the pillars of corruption linked to politicians. Penta has bought the above mentioned media outlets in order to get them under control and try to prevent those publishing stories about this company.

This happened in 2014 – with interesting results. SME, the leading daily, was owned in 50% by the company that founded the paper in 1993. The other 50% was owned by German publisher Reinische Post (RP), which was also the owner of the main Czech papers, *Lidové noviny* and *Mladá fronta DNES*. When RP sold these papers in 2014 to the Czech politician and businessman Andrej Babiš, it also sold its last stake in the Czecho-Slovak market – 50% of SME – to Penta. In response, journalists of SME – in fact, the core of the team, about 40 people – left the paper in protest against Penta.

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<sup>1</sup> For information on media consumption in Slovakia, see: <http://www.median.sk/pdf/2015/ZS151SR.pdf> and <http://online.aimmonitor.sk/>

Some months later, this group of journalists started “N”, a new daily with the support of the Slovak software company, Eset, which has most of its business in the USA, not in Slovakia. This was a huge defeat for Penta, because its operation had an unintended result. Penta had to agree to have a share of only 45% in SME (but still 100% in the other mentioned papers) only to show that it wants to guarantee the independence of the daily. As a result, the papers owned by Penta have so far behaved more or less independently. The question is, however, how long this situation can last.

### **Lesson from the ‘90s**

Broadly speaking, there are some good signs which make Slovak mainstream media progressive and tolerant. Compared to media in Central Europe, they are rather careful when reporting about minorities or immigrants. Even more so, the leading papers and TV channels are either indifferent or positive about them. During the refugee crisis, the mainstream media brought stories about suffering people and reported about the NGOs helping them. Negative stories about refugees were rather exceptional. This is a lesson from the ‘90s, from the era of the authoritarian government led by Vladimír Mečiar. A generation of Slovak journalists remember this past period very well because many of them had been very critical to Mečiar and his non-democratic and nationalistic politics. The result is the “conventional wisdom” that hatred against minorities leads to authoritarianism and kills freedom.

### **Education and organization**

The typical, rather universal problem of all post-communist countries is the absence of the ethical “self-regulation” of the media. Journalistic organizations suffered from the early ‘90s from the lack of elites because the older generation was compromised by the communist past and the new one was too young and without interest for organizing themselves into a form of syndicate. In Slovakia, officially, there is an “ethical commission” and a syndicate but without any widely accepted authority. The result is that no serious debate exists about the failures of the media, the censorship of the owners and publishers, not to even talk about the pressure from companies threatening to stop advertisement if the media write negatively about them.

Another universal problem is education. Universities have their faculties of journalism, which are often only the heritage of the communist era. The level of education is very low and old-style. My personal experience: as the editor-in-chief of the daily SME, I had a chance to learn about the level of young journalists coming from universities asking for a job. Their skills were so bad that it was much more efficient to hire students with a different education (history, economy, political science) and turn them into journalists. This experience speaks a lot about the quality of journalism education in Slovakia.

## **The story of “N”**

The positive story is, however, the story of “N”. The daily started in early 2015 with big support from the public. In its first months, the paper was able to acquire about 10,000 subscriptions, and by now, the number is about 19,000. The business model for the paper to survive is to have 20,000 paying readers, which they may get by the end of 2016.

This is very unique in Central Europe where readers are not used to pay for the content on the web (a recent exception is *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland with about 70,000 paying readers of its website). It is obviously unique from the perspective of the Czech Republic where much bigger newspapers are not able to get above 10,000 readers paying for the website.

The “N” represents the new model of journalism because its main income is from paying readers on the web, and the print version is only as a luxury. The model shows that even on such a small market like the Slovak one it is possible to survive with quality journalism. The daily “N” very soon became the crucial voice of independent press.

Another interesting story behind this is the new model of editing policy. The journalists of “N” have – thanks to the paying readers and their data – enormous amount of information about the habits of their readership, including what kind of texts readers prefer to read and how long they stay reading one article. The result is surprising: readers prefer long and well-edited articles about serious topics from politics to social problems. Actually, it confirms that the taste of the readers is very similar to the taste of the journalists. This is a big hope for the future, and it is in contradiction with the view that media need to be more entertaining to survive.

## **Dangerous websites**

Another – much more negative – trend of the Slovak media is the impact of the so-called conspiratory websites, which are very popular especially among young people. An example is “*Slobodný vysielateľ*” (Free Broadcaster), a radio only available on the internet, but which has its own website and hundreds of thousands of followers. The content is a combination of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda with all thinkable conspiracy theories and hatred against Muslims and Slovak Roma.

This medium has already showed how dangerous these channels could be. In March 2016, parliamentary elections were held in Slovakia, where 8% of the votes were casted for the fascist party (NSLS). Researchers found that among young voters (aged 18-24) about 23% voted for this party and many of them listen or read the website of *Slobodný Vysielateľ*. Research also found that 30% of young people in Slovakia trust the so-called alternative media (in other

words, the conspiracy websites) and do not trust traditional media, TV included.<sup>2</sup>

### **Slovakia on the top in Central Europe**

Despite all these negative tendencies, Slovakia is still a country of rather free media. The last report of Reporters without Borders (RSF) for the year 2016 puts Slovakia No.12 in the world, whereas the Czech Republic is in the 21<sup>st</sup> place, Poland in the 46<sup>th</sup> and Hungary in the 67<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for such a bad result in the case of Hungary and Poland is obvious: governments in both countries try heavily to control especially the public media – TV and radio. They also try to harm independent press by cutting the advertisements of state-owned companies, and on the other hand, financially helping the papers close to the government.

This is not the case in Slovakia and the Czech Republic where public media are in relatively good shape. This is actually a surprising development in Slovakia where public TV had been, for two decades, heavily controlled by politicians and where Prime Minister Robert Fico is well-known for his negative attitude toward journalists.

The director of the Slovak public TV and radio (it is one institution) is elected by the parliament. In 2012, Václav Mika, former chief of commercial TV Markíza, was elected to this position. There is no doubt that he must have been politically approved by Prime Minister Fico, but the key role was played by minister of culture Marek Maďarič, who is known as a defender of free speech.

The Slovak public TV led by Mika had developed, in four years, into a rather independent television with young and ambitious journalists. It is still not as professional and self-confident as the Czech public TV, which has a long and successful history of fights for its independence, but it is already playing a surprisingly positive role in public debate.

The reasons for Prime Minister Fico's lack of interest in controlling the media are twofold: first, he learnt that his popularity was actually based on his criticism of the Slovak media as unprofessional and biased against him. Simply, he discovered that his voters did not trust the media, and by his criticism targeted at journalists, he could attract voters. Fico, for example, refuses to answer questions asked by the journalists of the daily "N", although this practice is against the law.

The other reason is the fact that in Slovakia he could not build a medium which would support him because there are not enough serious journalists who would do the job. That is the legacy of the past, of the '90s when

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<sup>2</sup> Mikušovič, Dušan. 'Prieskum: Proruské naladenie Slovákov je mýtus, no klesá aj podpora EÚ'. <https://dennikn.sk/439321/prieskum-proruske-naladenie-slovakov-mytus-no-klesa-aj-podpora-eu/>

<sup>3</sup> Reporters without Borders, 2016 World Press Freedom Index. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

Vladimír Mečiar tried to control public media and build his own empire of newspapers but completely failed. Fico learnt from this lesson.

This is very different from the situation in Hungary and Poland where the leaders, Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński have been for years building their media empire supporting their political ideas. Hungary and Poland are countries deeply divided not only as societies but in terms of their media landscape, as well.

### **Positive change in justice**

In Slovakia, politicians have no real possibility to control the media. This is the big difference which gives Slovakia the rank No.12, and leaves the rest of the V4 far behind. In the case of the Czech Republic, minister of finance and business Andrej Babiš owns two newspapers and one radio – the fact which gives the Czech Republic worse reputation than Slovakia.

The position of Slovakia as the leading country in the media freedom index among the states of the V4 group is also due to developments in the justice system. Štefan Harabin, former head of the Supreme Court and the chief of the Council of Judges – the most important figure in the justice system – had to leave his office in 2015, and the implication was huge. Under Harabin's decade, there were drastic penalties imposed on journalists and publishers in civic trials where politicians and judges (with Harabin in the lead) sued the papers for "biased" articles. The penalties in some cases amounted to tens of thousands of Euros, and publishers had been seriously threatened by financial loss. This practice had a big impact on journalists, many of whom did not dare to do investigative work anymore. This situation changed after Harabin lost his position (mostly for other reasons though: for obvious corruption and the bad reputation of justice).

### **Post-truth politics**

There are many reasons to be satisfied with the level of the freedom of expression and journalism in Slovakia, but there are also reasons to worry, even if some of them are universal.

First of all, the number of Slovak readers is not big enough to build a market in which serious journalism could thrive. The result is that the best journalists cannot be paid well for doing their job. They do not have enough time to work on their stories because the staff of various media outlets is constrained by the costs. This means that investigative journalism is more exceptional than regular, and many cases of corruption, which could have been discovered, are not brought to light. Together with the lack of political will to fight corruption, this leads to its endemic increase.



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But even if there are scandals thanks to the work of investigative journalists, the role of the traditional media as the watchdog of democracy is decreasing due to the new phenomenon of social media. Politicians discovered that they do not need the media when they want to speak to the public. A camera on their smartphone and Facebook is sufficient. New populists can reach the public with these tools directly and gain hundreds of thousands of followers – numbers which no media outlet could guarantee any more. This leads to the new situation when politicians can directly talk to the public and lie without being controlled or challenged by journalists. This new era is called the era of post-truth politics and is a world-wide phenomenon. However, it is stronger in countries where media are weak, although free. This is the case of Slovakia.

**The lesson for post-communist countries**

The case of Slovakia is a useful lesson for all post-communist countries and is also a challenge. The discussion in Chisinau in March 2016, organized as part of the project “Frontiers of Democracy”, showed that countries without independent press and public TV and radio could hardly manage their way to democracy. The fact that in Moldova 60% of the population watch Russian TV is very worrying and so is the local oligarchs’ ownership of the press. Similar is the situation in Ukraine where authorities at least try to stop the influence from Russia, but where strong independent newspapers do not exist. The lack of organised quality journalism is a big threat to democracy, just like social media which promote conspiracy theories and hatred.

It is in the interest of democratic political elites to support independent journalism. The famous words of Thomas Jefferson – “...were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” – are still valid.

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