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SECOND RATED CAMPAIGN: THE POSITION OF REGIONAL ELECTION IN SLOVAK POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

The researches and literature on the political communication and campaigns is often only biased on the election which in theoretical point of view are characterise as the first-order elections. This study try to expand the scope on it, using the dates of the regional elections in Slovak republic, whose are define as the second-order election. The result showed that the electoral competition and the campaign at the regional level is still ambiguity and vague in the terms of promoting the regional issues, values. In other words, second – order elections are less important and more open to the national politics in the term of the dictating the rhythm of the election and regional policy. They also determine the outputs of „weaker“ offices as for example regional or local.

Key words: *communication, campaigns, second-order election, second-rate election, regional election, regionalism*

The development, impact and intensity of political communication reached also the region of post-communist countries in Central Europe. The development of political communication with the comparison to the western countries was characterised as a process of day – to – day learning. The main reason was that the post-countries step right the third age of the political communication². Both systems – political and media, from the beginning of their independence, were stands in front a new

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2 The scientific literature focus on three ages of political communication. The first age of political communication also known as the golden ages followed after the Second World War, when the connection of the voters and political parties was based on a strong ideological or party base. The second age of political communication started with the remaining impact of the television in the 60s. The media logic started to changed rapidly which climaxed in the third age of political communication.

environment, in other words the actors entered to a new politics and mediated reality (Žúborová: 2011).

Their forced rapidly the processes of homogenization, Americanization, mediatization, globalization. However the post-countries were not able to adapt the whole scales of these processes in their political and median systems. This in many cases led to a misunderstanding of the position of individuals (political) actors in the communication process and thus in some way undermines the overall functionality of the democratic system. In other words, the lack of effective communication to the society led to the opposite case – no willingness towards to the participation not only in the elections but also in the public affairs.

We can conclude that mass media are undoubtedly connective tissues of the democracy, through which they communicate with the citizens and elected political representatives – one of them are focusing on the primary desire for information, and another to influence others. Although we have a fairly wide knowledge of the political communication, literature provides only a minimum of comparative analysis on how to influence by one hand, the flow of information about politics, and on the other hand, the democratic character of political system and political, individual values.

The Slovak republic has already past her third regional election (2001, 2005, 2009), which outputs are the same, especially in the term of voter turnout, fluctuation of voters, negative mobilization, universality, ambiguity and vagueness. These are only few issues that affected the nature, status and legitimacy of the regional election campaign in Slovak republic.

The main objective of the present text is therefore to highlight the deficiencies which affecting the character of the „deformed“ regional campaigns in the context of the political communication.

We could today say that the literature and research emphasized the increasing personalization, negativity and also professionalization of politics in Slovak republic (Žúborová: 2011 a,b; Štefančík: 2012, Klimovský – Žúborová: 2011). But as Plasser and Plasser observe the research and the literature of these developments pertains to the first-order election and especially come from the United States (Plasser-Plasser: 2002). The first problem that we don't have any knowledge, or less knowledge of the position and impact of the main pillars of the third age of political communication on the second - order election, with expectation with the election to the European parliament.

In this study, we investigate the election campaigning in the regional election in Slovak republic. We are following the unwritten rule that the regional elections are characterise through the term „second – order“ elections and this we implicate for the position, level and intensity of the campaigns themselves.

The theoretical models of the „second - order“

As it was mentioned previous, the term second – order election was introduced in the decade of the firs direct elections in the European Parliament. Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt found out that the electoral results did not mirror the current situation in the European institution, rather there where reflecting the situation in the national parliaments. Reif and Schmitt also confirmed their hypothesis that *„what is important is the political situation of the first-order arena at the moment when the second-order election is being held“* (Reif: 1985). In other words, the comparison of this election suggest that there is a qualitative difference between these types of elections. The first difference is logically and rise from the fact that the second – rated election do not determine the composition of the government (Reif, Schmitt: 1980).

In other words, second – order elections are less important and more open to the national politics in the term of the dictating the rhythm of the election and regional policy. They also determine the outputs of „weaker“ offices as for example regional or local.

From the first point, our basis assumption, as we already wrote previously, will be built around three broad factors that characterise the second-rated election (Reif, Schmitt: 1980):

- Low level of voter’s participation – low voter turnout;
- better results for small parties,
- governmental parties lose favour and the opposition parties gain it – cyclical pattern,
- the main issues of the election campaigns are dominantly first – order specific issues (Šaradín: 2008)

We must also conclude, that Reif and Schmitt not made any attempt to expound complete model of every voters individual electoral choice, but as we can observe, they describe sort of elements which can be used to explain some of the patterns in terms of individual choice.

The first choice is related to the voters him / herself from voting to not voting. This could be related to the fact, that in this type of election

„nothing is in the stake“, and this is automatically absorbed by the main actors in the society – politics – media and voters. So without any sufficient information from the main actors (politics and media), voters are left with the only possibility to compare the competing parties, candidates on the basis of their work at the national level. This choice of voters' behaviour could be also influenced by the national electoral cycle. In other words, different patterns of voting behaviour are following the different cycle of the national politics – national governments (Reif: 1984, Marsch: 1998). Simply we can say, that if the second-order election is held before the national election, voters may act rationally / strategically in order to punish the governing parties, or to influence the national elections. Obviously governing parties lose votes anyway, but they lose less if the second-order election is held at the beginning, or close to the end, of the national electoral cycle. The second choice is to connect with the party. When we analyse the individual positions of the parties in the second-order election, we examine „shifting“, as a common action in the party system. Reif describes this action as the shift in support from bigger to smaller parties, the shift in support from government to non-government parties, and the shift from central to (more) extreme parties (Reif: 1984, pp. 249 - 254).

In the last decades, the model of second-order election was refreshed with new approaches, that very surrounding especially the nature of the election to the European parliament. The research conducted the public communication deficit (Scharpf: 1999, Schlesinger: 1999), decreased visibility of the elections in the national news that should give voters an indication of the importance of the election. The research on the news coverage in the EP election 2004 (Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, Boomgaarden: 2006, p. 21) also defines two main characteristics about the election campaign:

- low campaign intensity and
- national not European issues on the agenda.

If we followed the fact, that second-order elections refer to the issues, values, campaign and also the results of them are more or less influenced by the dominant political area – in terms of the first – order political area, our basic assumption will be the comparison of the theoretical approaches of the model of the second-order election within the condition of regional election in the Slovak Republic. But our main target will be the position of the campaigning at the regional level and by this reason we will also add the main approaches to the definition of Vreese (2009) of the second-order campaign, which was explained in the EP elections.

He defined the model of second-rated campaign through:

- the alleged / non-issue character of the election;
- absence of newsworthiness;
- lack of a core news values, conflicts, etc

Another concern, that we can add to this general model which is visible in the term of the regional election in CEE countries, in common, is the lack of electoral competition, which is influenced by the weakness of the regional government (Hooghe et a.: 2010).

Regional elections in Slovak republic

Each of elections are interesting not only in the term of political culmination of the division of mandates, but the statement about the political inclination of the voters. In particular, when the electoral system is a majoritarian. As we mentioned at the beginning of this article, the regional election in Slovak republic are after their third „round“, but their are still lack of any clear understanding of the position and the role of the representatives at the regional level.

In the case of regional elections in Slovak republic, it's also not easy to reach the summary finding of the votes cast. Not only that the election are held by majority system, the district differed significantly in the number of acting candidates, as well as selectable number of candidates in it.

Despite the fact, that the regional authorities have decision – making powers in social services, public transport, inter-regional cooperation, tourism or education, many people are still unaware of how much their are responsible to these powers. Also their are many specifications that should be able to promote in the campaigns and gain more popularity in the eyes of the voters and media, but still their remain the shadow of the national issues. As for example, the race for Bratislava region, which was still usually the most – watched (after Kosice region), but remain in the last places of the voter – turnout (see the table 1), or the traditionally Nitra region where in every election political parties formed a broad Slovak coalition following the main scope to prevent the electoral success of an ethnic Hungarian candidate.

As already Jan Buček (2011) has observed, we can see two fundamental aspect that are threatened the position of the campaign at the regional level – low participation in the election and the less standard political behaviour of the political parties (Buček: 2011, p. 10). The results of these elections have contributed also another fact, the rise of

„pessimism“ - partly maybe justified and partly not. Even the election results in the last decades where interpreted by the media as an evidence of „pessimism“ in the terms of loose of public support for the ruling coalition's, in other wards for the parties that where responsible for the political direction of Slovak republic after / before the national elections (Krivý: 2002). We can conduct that many statements from the media were partly justified, justified by the low voter participation and also political outcome of the elections that was reflected in the elected members and chairpersons.

Challenges to the electoral campaigning at the regional level

To explain the creation of the second-rated campaign in the regional election in Slovak republic, we start with the first approach of Reif and Schmitt (1980) broad factor that characterise the term second – order election, which is: *„lower level of voting participation, since less is at the peak stake of the citizens to participate in the election..... it's also related to the common popularity of the national political elites / parties, rather than promoting the particular regional issues, or specific individual characteristic of the candidates“.*

In the last three regional elections 2001, 2005, 2009, every step was followed by the same electoral rule (Act 303/2001). In this article we are focused only on the position of the chairpersons, while there are still less-more attractive and promote to the public. The Regional chairpersons are elected directly in a two round majority system, in other words two most successful candidates compete for the majority in the second round.

If we analyse the results of the regional election we can see that there is a number of additional disadvantages. The first of these has to do with the voter turnout in the second round, which is in common view lower than in the first round (Table 1). It mean that the main Sartori point of the „intelligent choosing“ in the second round from more informed voters is in Slovakian case a myth. This should be mean in the borders as Sarah Birch pointed it in her article *„that in the context of countries that are under democratization, there is a danger that an informed choice may be an antidemocratic choice“* (Birch: 2003, p. 325).

Table 1: Voter turnout the regional elections in Slovak republic 2001, 2005, 2009

Electoral district	2001		2005		2009	
	First round	Second round	First round	Second round	First round	Second round
Bratislava region	23,96	*	14,45	10,72	19,46	20,18
Trnava region	33,73	36,87	14,5	9,41	20,46	*
Trenčín region	21,55	16,17	12,3	7,12	20,59	15,77
Nitra region	34,69	39,49	27,67	16,19	21,81	*
Žilina region	23,47	10,85	15,69	9,19	23,68	*
Banska Bystrica region	24,16	19,92	18,65	10,65	27,06	18,01
Prešov region	25,5	18,06	19,47	13,2	26,31	19,22
Košice region	21,79	22,61	19,27	10,82	22,93	*
Total	26,02	22,61	18,02	11,07	22,9	18,39

* regional chairpersons elected in the First round

Source: Statistical Office

<http://portal.statistics.sk/showdoc.do?docid=5683/>

In other words, we can see the „antidemocratic choice“ to do not go vote for any alternative. The first reason that could be observed in the Slovakian case is the process of building a fruitful cooperation between the elections. We are use to, in the two – round systems that political alternative – party blocs are made, and the main party affiliation to build such block is the „closeness“ of the political programs or ideological issues.

Table 2: The elected chairpersons according to the political parties and independent candidates in regional elections in Slovak republic 2001, 2005, 2009

Electoral district	2001		2005		2009	
	First round	Second round	First round	Second round	First round	Second round
Bratislava region	SDKÚ, KDH, ANO, SMK, DS	-	-	INCA*	-	KDH, OKS, SaS, SDKÚ, SMK
Trnava region	-	HZDS, Smer, SOP	-	HZDS, LB, P SNS, ZSNS	INCA*	-
Trenčín region	-	HZDS	-	ANO, HZDS, P SNS, ZSNS	-	HZDS, Smer
Nitra region	-	HZDS, SDL', Stred, SOP	-	ASV, KSS, LB, HZDS, P SNS, ZSNS	Smer, SDKÚ, KDH	-
Žilina region	-	HZDS	-	ANO, HZD, SNS, Smer	Smer, SNS, HZDS, HZD, SZ, SF	-
B.Bystrica region	-	HZDS, Smer	-	HZD, SNS, SZS, KDH, Smer,	-	HZDS, Smer
Prešov region	-	SDKÚ, KDH	-	HZD, SNS, Smer	-	Smer, HZDS, HZD, SZS
Košice region	-	HZDS, SDL', SOP	-	HZD, Smer	Smer, SMK, HZDS, HZD, S.O.S, Most-Híd, Liga	-

INCA* independent candidate

Source: Statistical Office

<http://portal.statistics.sk/showdoc.do?docid=5683/>

In the Slovakian case these factors are more rare than usual. The trend was visible in the first two regional election (2001, 2005), where more atypical coalitions breaking the traditional divisions in the party sphere (Table 2). Despite the fact, that the last regional election in 2009 the atypical party blocs almost disappeared, still is the voter turnout on a low level.

This competition ignorance not only in the second round (first we must also count), could be influence not only by the atypical party blocks in the past, but also the by the unclear goals of the candidates. Maybe more standard coalitions might influence the outcome in the terms of participation in the next election, or the growing number of independent candidates.

This leads us to the second approach of Reif and Schmitt (1980), which is connected with the definition of the second-order election, which is: *„the results are strongly related to the popularity of political parties at the national level and the cyclical pattern of rise / fall in support within the parties in government or opposition – such pattern is define as an opportunity to protest against the current office“.*

Following this approach we can confirm that the parties in the government loosed support in every elections except the year 2009, moreover this was related to the stage of the previous government in the term of popularity of the strongest coalition party Smer-SD. Also the comparison of all elections proved that in every election the parties are turning to favour the constellation of a party bloc rather to run the competition alone, to maximize their ability to win the seat. For example, in the first regional election (2001) a number of 102 candidates from the coalitions parties take the seats (76 from the opposition parties), in the second only 62 (opposition 1) and in the last regional election only 32 candidates from coalitions parties (34 from the opposition) were successful in the competition without any cooperation, in other words their were not forming any party blocs. A different reaction to the political parties in the parliament and their behaviour is the growing number of elected independent candidates, while in 2001 elections there were 76, in the 2005 elections only 39 councilors and in the 2009 regional elections 55 independent candidates. We can see the main pillar that comes from the majority two round system, or better jut „the half“ of it, in the term of creation blocs, which is related to the polarization from the national level politics. The missing peace in it is the voter behaviour, which should be visible in the second round within the voting for another alternative, or another than the first preference, obviously it was mentioned previous that the participation is very low.

The last approach of Reif and Schmitt (1980) about the main campaign issue is related Vresse (2009) „lack of core news and specific values“ and related to the first-order election, which is: *„absence of revolving around specific issues, values and, in our case, regional values,.... they are preferred dominant issues from the first-order elections“*.

In comparison within the all elections in the last decades we can conclude, that in the early years the campaign issues were influenced by dissatisfaction with the position and reforms of the territorial division in the regions. On one hand, we saw lack of clear information about the role and the future of the regional politics, and also the absence of promotion in the term of importance of the regional elections. As Buček (2002) observed, that in the first election 2001 *„electoral rules that preferred party voting and placed restrictions on campaigning via the electronic media also affected voter turnout, so the governing party voters probably stayed home due to dissatisfaction with the efficiency of their national government“* (Buček: 2002, p. 149).

We can also observe two types of campaigning, whose are related to the subject – object which is promoted. The first type, we described it as *„general policy face“* is a sort of campaigning, which is related to promote general (national) issues, without any indication of use of the phrase *„regional – regionalism – regional issues“*. In other words, there is an absence of any identification factor within the region in the messages towards the voters, there is an absence of concrete proposals and solutions to the current situation in the regions. Usually the main issues of the regional elections are related to the national situation and the candidates using phrases as for example: *„No cause, just honest work“* (candidate on the chairperson Jozef Mikuš in Banská Bystrica region in the election 2009), or *„Responsibly and consistently“* (candidate on the chairperson Tibor Mikuš in Trnava region in the election 2009), or *„We offer more than just promises“* (candidate on the chairperson of party bloc KDH, SDKÚ, SaS – Ján Hudacký in Prešov region in the election in 2009).

The second type, in this article described as *„party policy face“* is a sort of campaigning, which is strongly related to the promotion of the candidates through political elites on the national level – parliamentary level. In other words, the candidates are using party identification as their main targeting tool in the campaign period. Such promotion is following the general point to mobilize selected parts of social segments (party members, activists, etc.).

Conclusion

Despite the increase of the voter participation in the last regional election we can observe that in terms of „legitimacy“ of the elected candidates it's still remain in the under-represented level. One of the main reasons for the low participation is the lack of a strong relation of the electorate with their own regions, or in other words – the absence of a specific „regional society“. One of the possible reasons is that the term „VÚC“ (HTUs) isn't still associated in the people minds, which could be due the „youth“ of the units. Another reason could be seen in the wrong way of using the communication networks, especially in the campaign period. Political actors rather use party affiliation to promote their personality, rather than to promote regional values, approaches etc. The main reason for using such electoral strategies is the absence of a relevant topics or problems, so to fear of losing electoral preferences the potential candidates for the offices using general terms, slogans. So if they choose any strategy, it would be neutral or as the previous regional election showed, they are on the course of negative campaigning.

After the last regional election, even when the voters participation slightly increase, still their are many question how to improve this situation, how to step from the shadow of the second – rate. The first, what should be done, as also some authors that observe this at the European level in the parliamentary election recommended a permanent or constant contact with the citizens – political actors should constantly work not only before the election. Here is one tool that could be apply especially on the regional level and could be more preferable so called door – to – door contact, as it was applied in the local elections.

Another change that could solve the undesirable situation is to change legislation (electoral system to STV) and to change the election law itself, or rather a clarification especially in sections dealing with the campaign period (specify the campaign tools, time horizon, the possibility of promotion through advertising, radio, television).

One possible premise is also to built direct communication network between citizens and political (regional) actors that would gain attention from the citizens into the political process (regular transmission of political debates in the councils, regional policy news through short messages via mobile, as it is already implemented in some municipalities). In other word, with the connectivity to achieve convergence of the regions, regional policy towards the public and thereby lay a solid foundation of decentralization and regionalization of the Slovak republic.

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