

Selected aspects of political marketing in Slovakia



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ABSTRACT: The authors concentrate on particular aspects of political marketing within the framework of Slovak conditions. At the beginning, the article highlights characteristics of political market in Slovakia and then focuses on the importance of selected tools of political marketing, namely marketing research (public opinion researches and pre-election surveys), behaviour of electors, influence of mass media and communication on voters (media in marketing communications of political parties, new tools of communication) and engagement of celebrities in the election campaigns. Finally visible and enlarging significance of professionalisation of election campaigns is stressed.

KEYWORDS: political market, market research, media, marketing communication



INTRODUCTION

Systems of democracy and free market economy have created new conditions also in the area of politics. Political parties and politicians themselves (or deputies of concrete political parties) are moving from first “amateurish” efforts with-in their management and marketing to more sophisticated conceptions based on understanding of electorate, for example understanding of consumers’ behaviour. The importance of political marketing is continuously enlarging and development of particular marketing tools is also visible in Slovakia. The theory of political marketing is slowly but continuously evolving, more and more articles about political marketing are published in scientific and professional sources; first publications about political marketing have been introduced into the market.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL MARKET IN SLOVAKIA

The sixth national parliamentary election was held in 2006, 21 political parties and movements were enrolled and finally 6 political subjects entered the parliament. The lowest number of electors was recorded – 54.6%. SMER (Social Democracy) won the highest number of votes – 29.14%, its political leader was Robert Fico. Today's governing coalition includes: SMER, the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS). The opposition consists of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKU-DS), the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH).

Changes within legal environment have some effects on political campaigns and on parliamentary election, e.g., moratorium on political campaigns was cancelled, moratorium on pre-election surveys was cancelled, private media were engaged into political campaigns for the first time, election lasted one day, electors with Slovak citizenship that were able to vote by mail, the threshold for becoming a member of a parliament was reduced from 10 to 3%, introducing the so-called elective deposit.

Political campaign of 2006 was characterised by the following topics: reforms and their changes or cancellation, political culture, political ethics, corruption of MPs, minority rights.

Year 2007 was considered a year of testing the governing coalition cohesion. The coalition was afraid of everything that could potentially weaken the production capability of key industry branches leading to industrial growth (automotive industry, oil manufacturing, metallurgy, and building industry). Health insurance companies, pension-system companies, trade chains and media were a subject of verbal declarations as well as legislative changes. SMER enforced controversial legislation regarding profits of health insurance companies with major interventions in the field of 1st and 2nd pillars of income assurance system. It succeeded in enforcing an act through parliament, which enables building highways and high-speed roads before performing the property consolidation.

One of the biggest cases of 2007 was a transfer of restituted lands in the High Tatras reported by Slovak daily paper SME, which caused the abjuration of the Minister of Agriculture Miroslav Jureňa. Another case, which caused the resignation of Minister of Defence F. Kašický, was a tender for cleaning services, greenery maintenance, removal of show from the barracks as well as in the premises of Ministry of Defence in Slovak Republic.

During the period of unification of Europe, one of the most important events for Slovak Republic was the entry into Schengen area at the end of the year 2007. The condition of the Slovak economy at the end of 2007 was as follows: the average wage was 19,514 SK, unemployment at the level of 11.2%, growth of the economy exceed-

ing 9%. The year 2008 was distinguished by intensive preparations of the Slovak Republic for entering the Euro zone.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING RESEARCH WITHIN THE POLITICAL MARKET

There is a need of each political party to know well its loyal constituents, as well as those hesitating, inconstant in opinion or refusing. Having such knowledge, it is possible to make decision about constituents to whom the party is willing to address its message as well as decision about how the message should be delivered.

Information, which the political party is presenting, could be in the form of secondary or primary data. It is possible for the data to be gathered by the political party, or by research agency. These agencies are surveying politician's credibility, preferences for the party, constituents' preferences and sympathies towards the party. In addition, they are making electoral forecasts either ordered by the political party or for the purpose of informing the public.

Pavel Haulík, sociologist and the director of the MVK Agency, which is surveying public opinion, claims: "Investigations are mirroring the development of the society for which it is good to know the relevant growth trends." Often politicians have the propensity to declare knowing everything even without making appropriate surveys. They feel comfortable with themselves even when the numbers do not speak in their favour. Marketing information system is an important marketing tool though.

In the Slovak Republic, periodic investigations, or more precisely surveys which are made to order the political subjects are conducted by research agencies, such as: Markant, GfK, DICIO, FOCUS, Medián, MVK, ÚVVM, OMV SRo.

SURVEYS' ACCURACY OR WHAT IS THE SLOVAK CONSTITUENT LIKE?

Public opinion surveys are carried out for the purpose of giving citizens the chance to express what they think, but between the intention to do something and actually doing, there is no perfect linear relationship. Therefore, the constituents' actions could differ considerably from their declared opinion. The individual act of election can be influenced by many factors. Someone's claims to vote for particular party could be subject to change even when the elector does not know that at the time of making a decision. It may seem unlikely, but even extreme weather, either positive or negative, is sufficient to change the constituents' mind. It is possible for the elector to change the opinion because of the time span that occurs between the survey and actual voting. Majority of people are making last minute decisions; they are sometimes not decided until they are about to cast the voting paper into the ballot box.

Slovak political party SMER, for instance, got 13.5% of votes in the parliamentary elections in 2002, which put it in the third place. According to the surveys, the

expectations were to get 20%. The case of SMER represented typical scenario of “slippery” voters, who expressed the determination to vote although have never entered the polling station. Elections of 2006 showed stabilized number of voters. Preferences were slightly above 30% before the elections, while the actual percentage was 29.14% of votes.

Many Slovak people think that politics is “dirty game”, which results in no interest in political course of action and their refusal to vote. They resigned their right to vote and therefore their absence influenced the result of the elections.

Eduard Kukan was the most preferred candidate in the presidential elections of the year 2004. It seemed that people wanted to get rid of the obligation to decide on what was less wrong and decided to vote according to their best convictions, no matter what were the chances for their preferred candidate to be elected. Others did not vote at all.

Constituency sometimes make decisions with respect to “vote for what would cause lesser evil.” An example was the presidential election in 2004, when voters opposed the candidacy of V. Mečiar and decided to vote for I. Gašparovič instead.

Media have a great influential power in respect of the accuracy of the surveys and the elections’ results. Political pressure puts certain political parties and their constituency apart in the sphere of being not accepted. Voters are afraid to confess their opinions and even though they are emotionally associated with their leader, the attack of media usually causes their responses to change. In the past, this was a case of members and sympathizers of HZDS. Nowadays, the same scenario may occur in the case of media conflict with Fico. A surprising solution could happen if the next election showed even better result than survey preferences.

Media present the opinion of populist politician R. Fico. Former strict reforms have not been changed significantly. Surveys before the elections of 2006 showed that people were basically not against reforms. They wanted them to alleviate, which Fico administration did (although sometimes seemingly only).

Nowadays, the paradox is that Fico leading SMER has better support of electorate than before the elections (voting preferences of SMER before the elections in 2006 were 30%, in May 2007 – 37.3%, in February 2008 – 45.4%). Generally, after the party enters the government, its support is falling down (in the autumn of 2005, after 7 years of M. Dzurinda being prime minister, his administration had only 18% of sympathizers among the surveyed respondents).

All stated examples speak in favour of importance of knowing the public opinion, and prepare marketing activities based on this information.

THE RELATIONSHIP – MEDIA AND MEDIA CREDIBILITY SURVEYS

The media are the most important sources of information about elections, politicians, political parties, the public and, particularly, political life. That is why they are often called the fourth power in the society, the fourth pillar of democracy of the

middle age. In developed democracies the media point out to harmful phenomena in the society and supervise running of public domains.

The role of both the public and private media is to offer an honest, objective and truthful view on events in compliance with the media legislation in force. Citizens have the right to objective information and the media violate their rights if they do not provide them with adequate and truthful information about activities of public officials and politicians. A deliberate misinformation, which favours particular political or other interest groups, may heighten the barrier between politicians and citizens. The loss of trust to intermediaries of information can result in creating an aversion to political institutions and their representatives.

Politicians need the media; they use them for presenting their own personalities and political programmes. However, they do not always like them. A lot of politicians feel that the media only attack them.

R. Fico said recently that the media are a stronger opponent of SMER than the opposition. He claims that the media are not in favour of him and that the number of misleading pieces of information on the Government and political parties in coalition is on the increase. A similar view was expressed by J. Slota (specifically 9.3.2008 in the TV debate "Na telo").

The President of the Slovak Republic I. Gašparovič shows his reaction to various articles referring to his attitudes towards events at the political scene through his spokesman on the website www.prezident.sk.

On the other hand, journalists reported about interfering in their articles – on TA3. "Some cases, which did not favour any political party, were not allowed to be broadcast; reports were withdrawn or cut through," said one of the journalists. The management of the channel denies an inappropriate interference in reports on governmental parties and claims that "according to independent surveys TA3 brings the most balanced and objective coverage" (SME 28.2.2008, p. 4).

During the first months of 2008, the new Press Act became one of the most controversial topics in connection with the media. Fico's Cabinet considers the right to an answer in the new Press Act. Thus the newspaper should issue a politician's reaction to each article that seems to him to be non-objective or untruthful. The formulation of the right to an answer elaborated by the Ministry for Culture has aroused criticism not only of the opposition and publishers but also of international institutions. The opposition has even conditioned the support for the Lisbon Agreement by withdrawing the bill of the Press Act.

It is necessary to mention that even first-quality legislation can guarantee neither an independent conduct of the media nor truthful information. Morals, ethics, and sense for fair-play are much more important than written rules.

People in Slovakia trust the media; they can choose from the opinion-forming daily press, radio and television channels. They often watch international channels, e.g. Hungarian, Czech, Austrian, Polish, Ukrainian and many others and thus they can make comparisons. According to surveys, the most credible institution in Slo-

vakia is the radio. It is trusted by 79% of respondents, which presents a score higher by 13% than in the European Union. The second most credible institution is television with 71% of credibility, and the press is placed third with 53%. (Eurobarometer, 26.9.–11.10.2007 a sample of 1162 inhabitants of Slovakia).

OFFENSIVE COMMUNICATION

Marketing communication of political parties is very similar to, and at the same time very different from communication in business environment. One of the main differences in political communication is so called negative communication. It is very typical of recent election campaigns worldwide. It is a tool that can discourage voters from supporting a party that is the target of such communication. It can show competitors in a negative way and its goal is to draw attention to not acceptable actions or attributes. Political parties sometimes try to be ironic or mock competitors or their opinions or actions in debates, meetings and billboards.

But we have to say that a negative campaign does not always have to be effective. There is a risk that emotional people do not think about facts but stick to the hurt one. Who feels like a hero does not ask questions. And unknown politician can benefit from being mentioned by competitors. People react positively if mistakes of politicians come to light, but they find it very unethical if accusations are extreme and unreasonable.

The most aggressive politician is probably M. Dzurinda. He is referred to as a power obsessed person who cannot handle the situation of being in opposition. He commented the special parliament meeting in December 2007 at seven o'clock in the evening that "only thieves work at night." Many people reacted to this statement; they sent many e-mails and letters to media. They said that M. Dzurinda belonged to the past and it was time for a new leader of SDKÚ-DS. Unionist demanded a public apology from him.

MEDIA IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Radio and television are very popular. Especially television became main tool of political parties' communication. It is the main source of information about politics, political parties and politicians. It is a powerful medium – who is not on TV does not exist.

But there were hardly any TV ads of political parties in 2006. New election law did not require to show them in traditional blocks. Prices of such ads are quite high and political parties need to share their messages in a professional way so that they do not fade.

In addition to paid TV ads a politician can be seen on TV in political news and political talk shows. Leaders of political parties try to present themselves in political talk shows. If a politician is interesting for media, has his own opinions, reacts to cur-

rent topics and problems, he is often shown in news and gets invitations to talk shows. He benefits from being often shown on television. (The record holds talk show called "Sito" on TV Markiza, on July 8, 2006 with J. Slota (SNS), P. Hrušovský (KDH) and B. Bugár (SMK). This political talk show had the most viewers in that year.) But commercial TVs remain aloof from these talk shows and remove them from their programming. In March 2008 there were several talk shows on Slovak television: STV – "O 5 minút 12", Markíza – "Na telo", JOJ – "De Facto", TA3 – "V politike".

Very popular tools of political commercials are billboards and posters. They can provide much information and statements of political parties and people are constantly exposed to them. There were 13 000 billboards in 2006 when we had elections in Slovakia. Monthly income from renting one billboard was 5 to 6 thousand Slovak crowns on average. In the past, some of the parties had problems because of too many billboards. Voters were not pleased that political party paid so much money for this kind of advertisement. This is one of the reasons why the party SMER had fewer billboards in 2006 than in 2002. SDKÚ had 604 billboards in 2002 and about 350 billboards in 2006. Part of the money they wanted to spend on billboards was spent in commercial TVs, because there was the new law that allowed the parties to present themselves on commercial TVs.

WEB PAGES IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The Internet is a phenomenon of the modern era and websites have become an integral part of a daily life. They serve not only as an information and communication channel, but also provide a real marketing tool. With an increasing use of the Internet, the possibilities to address voters in a direct way offer a great opportunity for the political parties in the sense that they can directly communicate with their potential voters. A special group of "first-time-voters" is, with regard to its age, such a group that uses the Internet the most frequently. However, a main precondition to attract the votes of this group of voters is to have a well functioning website, with easy access, user-friendliness and clearness in the conveying messages. At present, every political party represented in the Parliament (as well as other registered parties), the president of the SR, and many individual politicians have their own websites.

The study (www.softpae.com/files/studia_volby_2006.pdf) that analysed websites of the political parties showed that younger and more modern political parties have also more modern approach to the Internet usage and its design. On the contrary, many political parties underestimate electronic communication with their political voters. One of the most underestimated criteria of almost all the political parties' websites is that they have many technical barriers for handicapped people (with impairment of vision, hearing, or with other health problems).

According to this study, the party SMER has got the best web page. It was a big mistake not to have advertising campaigns on the Internet and not to benefit from anti-campaigns. SMK is another party that is able to employ opportunities of com-

munication *via* the Web. On their web page you can find basic, as well as very specific information, everything is written in 3 languages and it provides e-mail address for further communication with their voters.

There is a discussion about voting *via* the Internet. An online election can result in higher attendance, and more young people would vote. However, opponents of this think that the Internet users are easy to manipulate.

ENGAGEMENT OF CELEBRITIES IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Political parties often engage celebrities in the election campaigns, and they do so in spite of their different opinions about their engagements. On the one hand, it is well known that many voters prefer celebrities rather than actual politicians. "To draw people's attention, at least for a short moment, to something, which people would not otherwise pay attention to; and using 'good faces' of well-known celebrities or people who are often portrayed by the media may significantly help," explains his view R. Grežo, creative teamleader of Istropolitana D'Arcy Agency. On the other hand, in the post-election survey of opinions the respondents claimed that their choice of the political party was not influenced by the opinions of the publicly known personalities. F. Flašík (well-known executive director of advertisement agency Donar, and the chief of the political campaign of the winning party SMER in 2002) said that participation of the celebrities in the election campaigns had almost no effect. Approximately 20 well-known faces from the culture and sports participated in the last presidential campaign in 2004. Campaign teams placed a bet on actors, singers, sportsmen and sportswomen, as well as their trainers. While in the previous election meetings and events celebrities participated if they were paid, in the last presidential election in 2004, they become involved voluntarily on their own initiative and in most cases, without any claim for remuneration (only transportation and accommodation costs were covered). Candidates, such as for example F. Mikloško and R. Schuster, decided not to invite any artists into their presidential campaigns. Another candidate, E. Kukan, however, was supported by the highest number of celebrities, although other candidates, M. Bútora, I. Gašparovič, and V. Mečiar did not want to fall behind and used celebrities as a marketing tool in their promotion materials, but mainly during the meetings with voters organized across Slovakia. Some other celebrities were not invited to be personally engaged, but if they had been, they would not have refused such an offer. Other celebrities said that they are publicly known and they do not want to be associated with any political parties, so they would not accept to be a part of any political campaign.

PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Election campaigns become more and more professional. Political parties learn from their previous mistakes and at the same time they try hard to find really pro-

essional campaigners abroad, as well as at home, especially for particular activities. Parties do not prepare campaigns by themselves anymore. For example, SDKÚ-DS made the best of the World Bank services whose experts elaborated a manual for the Government of Mikulas Dzurinda how to introduce various steps during the implementation phase of various economic and social reforms. Agencies and advisers help politicians during the public scrutiny, meetings, TV broadcasting (i.e. with dress, make-up, hair-style, rhetoric, etc.), but also during the negotiations with the broadcasting companies in order to obtain prime broadcasting time on TV and radio. In addition, they do the same during the realization and procurement of the media space in the press. In 2006, during the parliamentary campaign in Slovak Republic, some political parties, for example SDKÚ-DS, decided to assign personal election managers for those candidates who were ranked at the top of the election list (first four to five places).

CONCLUSION

Marketing in politics, as any other new phenomena, brings several controversial trends. On the current political market in the Slovak Republic, one can see more experts in politics than marketers. A trend of “marketizing politics” in Slovakia cannot, however, be ignored, nor should be considered as a magic wand without any reservation. It should be acknowledged that a success and an electoral victory is unlikely to happen without a certain professionalism in the political arena during the period of the election and mastering marketing knowledge and tools; this is important at any level of election, be that municipal, regional or national.

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