

The Role of Social (Political) Identity and Mediated “Reality” in Voter Behaviour (Case Study Slovakia)³⁹

Martina Švecová

Abstract

The study examines why voters in Slovakia's corruption-ridden political landscape continue to support politicians with criminal ties, despite extensive media exposure of their misconduct. Drawing from Lillian Manson's 'Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity', it suggests that emotional bonds and social identities often override rational evaluations, with media representation of political figures playing a pivotal role. The analysis focuses on the representation of Slovak Prime Ministers Peter Pellegrini and Igor Matovič during the early COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how journalistic practices, intensified by a multiplier effect, shape public perceptions and impact democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: balance analysis, emotions, hostile media effect, media discourse, representation, social identity, self-categorization theory, sentiment analysis

Introduction

The author examines the connection between the representation of politicians by leading online media and voters' tendency to support them despite associations with corruption or scandals. Recent research suggests that the core of this issue lies in social identity, wherein voters feel an affinity towards a political party, perceiving negative portrayals as threats to their group (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Ispas, 2013; Mackie et al., 2000; Mason, 2018). The emotions of justified anger infused into articles through selective paraphrasing and quotations, the elements of discourse, can inadvertently achieve the opposite effect (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), leading to polarization and closing off voters from rational dialogue, despite the media's intent to act as guardians of democracy by highlighting malpractices.

This study investigates the balance and sentiment in online articles, focusing on both theoretical evidence and media discourse analysis. The period of analysis specifically spans from 1 to 31 March 2020, capturing the initial month of the pandemic in Slovakia. Balance explores the relationship between the quantity of politicians' statements used by the media which represents visibility and sentiment discourse analysis which focuses on the overall perception of articles. It investigates the media's

³⁹ Cite as: Švecová, M. (2024). The Role of Social (Political) Identity and Mediated “Reality” in Voter Behaviour (Case Study Slovakia). In K. Carrilho, L. Horsmanheimo, & K. Linnamäki (Eds.), *Reflections on emotions, populism and polarisation: HEPP3 conference proceedings* (pp. 141-158). University of Helsinki. *The HEPPsinki working papers on emotions, populism and polarisation*, 3(1).

representation of visibility and overall perception of politicians' statements, looking for signs of a multiplicative effect where the media amplify the negative portrayals of these politicians.

In Slovakia, exceptional circumstances have emerged: firstly, the murder of a journalist linked to the ruling SMER- Sociálna Demokracia (Direction - Social Democracy, hereafter referred to as Direction) party; secondly, an elite change with Directions' government replaced after 12 years; and thirdly, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, during the initial month of the pandemic, from March 1 to 31, 2020, two prime ministers sequentially communicated the virus's progression at press conferences following the elite change. This study seeks to elucidate the differential media representations of two Slovak prime ministers during this initial phase of the Covid-19. The main research question (RQ) aims to illuminate the media's stance toward these two politicians and investigate whether the irrational behaviour of voters is partly influenced by the actions of journalists. Main RQ: *"What is the representation of the two Slovakian politicians and their statements related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovakian mainstream media during the initial outbreak period (1-31 March 2020)?"*

This study builds on existing theories by applying them to a novel context—media representations of Slovakian politicians during a global health crisis, assessing how these representations influence voter behavior through the lens of social identity. By mapping the interplay between media discourse and voter psychology, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of political communication processes and offers insights into strategies for more informed and effective media engagement in political contexts.

The political background

The Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries have undergone a significant socio-political change since the fall of communism. The transformation of society coincided with the development of information and communication technologies, and digitization together with the Internet changed completely the ways how content is consumed, and the size of potential audiences (Jakubowitz & Sükösd, 2008). The transition from a communist to a democratic regime is still underway, despite some ups and downs.

In 2012, early elections were won by Direction with 44.41% of the vote and a single-party government was formed. One of the factors that contributed to their victory was the Gorilla scandal⁴⁰ (Leška, 2013). From that point on, Direction had a decisive say in the parliament as well as in the government. However, subsequent events in Slovakia showed that even Direction could not avoid business' influence and connections to 'mafia spheres' became gradually apparent. The situation escalated with the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina on 21 February 2018.

⁴⁰ Gorilla is the name of the scandal concerned material allegedly leaked from Slovenská informačná služba (Slovak Intelligence Agency, SIS) files that was published online in 2011.

The most apparent impact of the killing of the journalist was that the country's trust in the democratic government led by Direction, and the subsequently formed movement called For a Decent Slovakia became undermined. The movement managed to organize demonstrations in regional cities all over Slovakia in 2018, and Robert Fico resigned under pressure as Prime Minister and was replaced by Peter Pellegrini, his party fellow for the rest of the mandate. Robert Fico has remained the chair of Direction, whereas Peter Pellegrini left the party after the 2020 elections and founded his party called Voice – Social Democracy (Voice). Such a dramatic course of events was ended by the parliamentary elections on 29 February 2020, won by a populist political party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO). The 2020 elections brought about a change after a long period of single-party rule and one-politician dominance. The government was formed by OLaNO, and its leader Igor Matovič became the new Slovak Prime Minister and also a symbol of a change in political elites in Slovakia. However, he was not Prime Minister for long either. After the dynamic government of the Ordinary People and early parliamentary elections in 2023, Direction and Voice won again. One of the priorities of the current government is the modification of the law in an abbreviated legislative procedure, which includes, among other things, the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office, the reduction of penalties for property and economic activity, increasing the threshold of damage caused by criminal activity and the possibility of reconsidering agreements on guilt and punishment that have already been validly concluded, among others (Aktuality.sk, 2024). This intention already caused new waves of demonstrations as well as disagreement by the bodies of the European Union.

The real concern is that if authoritarian elites or undemocratic subjects come to power, a country faces the threat of authoritarian transformation (Haydanka, 2021). In such a case, two political regimes can occur. In the first case, the liberal-democratic opposition prevails, and the country resumes the form of a democratic state. Or, in the second case, authoritarianism gains high social legitimacy and becomes the future model of a political regime (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Social identity perspective

According to Ispas (2013), the social identity perspective, which was initially introduced by Tajfel and Turner, encompasses both social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT). This framework offers a robust method for analysing voter behaviour within the context of media influence. SIT primarily concerns intergroup relations, elucidating how group members' interpretation of intergroup dynamics shapes group relations and strategies employed by members of subordinate groups to address their subordinate status. Tajfel's studies demonstrated that participants displayed favouritism toward their ingroup over outgroup members, shifting from individual-based to group-based interactions (Tajfel, 1974). The key insight from Tajfel's research, relevant to this paper, is that individuals often prioritize the success of their group over maximizing overall benefits, even if it means their group receives fewer benefits. Tajfel highlights that, in such situations, the desire for victory often takes precedence. In contrast, SCT focuses on the consequences of identifying as a group member. SCT explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups at different levels

(personal or social identity) and how the salience of these categories influences their behaviour, emphasizing the shift from seeing oneself as a unique individual to a representative of a particular group. This theory helps explain phenomena such as in-group favouritism and out-group derogation in group contexts (Turner et al., 1979).

The perspective is encapsulated by seven psychological principles that unfold sequentially. Initially, individuals classify themselves into social groups. The relevance of these groups varies by context, influencing their salience, such as during specific media consumption activities. When a group's relevance is psychologically prominent, individuals proceed to compare their group (in-group) against others (out-groups). This comparison can lead to a sense of positive distinctiveness if the in-group is perceived favourably. This process contributes to one's social identity, which in turn impacts self-esteem (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Scheeper's and Derks's position that the preference for the ingroup is an automatic and unconscious cognitive process. Subsequently accenting the inherent prioritization of ingroup-related information they refer to motivated reasoning (2016). Motivated reasoning as described by Lodge and Taber, is the cognitive process through which individuals align their choices with their preferred beliefs rather than objective truths. The brain tends to prioritize information that aligns with one's desired beliefs, making it more accessible than contradictory information. Consequently, it becomes challenging to rectify imaginary or exaggerated conflicts as the human brain tends to resist revising erroneous beliefs about opposing viewpoints. (2013).

The Role of emotions in voter behaviour

Another extension of SIT in the social identity perspective is intergroup emotions theory, which posits that group members can experience emotions on behalf of the group (Mackie et al., 2000). Valentino et al. discovered a positive association between anger and participation, while anxiety exhibited a negative correlation and enthusiasm had a relatively minor impact on participation rates (2011). Similarly, Manson argues that only threat-based arguments had effects on intended activism in her research. On the contrary, the messages enthusiastic or supporting didn't have the same results on the intended activism (2018). Anger is widely acknowledged in social theory as a reaction to injustice, inherently tied to relational aspects (Holmes, 2004) and mediated anger is typically a collective emotion, especially when expressed publicly to address an injustice (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

Emotions in media representation

The psychological principles outlined in these theories are manifested vividly during media consumption, particularly evident during high-stakes events such as political crises. Hartmann and Tanis (2013) researched how groups of respondents perceived manipulated news articles about abortion issues. They divided the participants into two groups: pro-life and pro-choice. After reading the manipulated article that presented both perspectives, the participants deemed the article manipulative, especially those with strong convictions. The results were relevant, especially among the highly

convinced individuals. The authors of the study opened the discussion about the relevance of the integration of hostile media effect into social identity perspective (2013). Hostile media effect illustrates how media representations can exacerbate group polarization, prompting defensive stances among voters—a crucial aspect of the paper investigation into the representation of Slovakian politicians during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Within these circumstances, emotions such as "justified media anger" serve as attempts to shed light on political injustices (e.g., corruption or connections with organized crime groups). However, this is juxtaposed against the social identity of voters who defend their chosen party. Furthermore, negative media coverage of politicians could be counterproductive if it reinforces existing social identities (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013). Voters who identified with a particular party or ideology were often resistant to negative information about their preferred candidate, which could lead to the maintenance of corrupt or discredited parties in power.

Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová (2018) argue that the re-election of discredited or corrupt parties in Slovakia can be explained in part by the role of social identity in shaping voter preferences. They note that voters in Slovakia often identify with a particular political party or ideology, which can make it difficult for them to switch their allegiance even when confronted with evidence of corruption or wrongdoing (2018). Additionally, motivated reasoning explained in social identity perspective chapter, as explored by Lodge and Taber (2013), further complicates the interaction between voter identity and media consumption. This concept explains the cognitive bias toward favouring information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs, which is crucial for understanding why voters may dismiss negative portrayals of favoured politicians.

Media discourse

Building upon the social identity perspective discussed earlier, chapter on media discourse analysis delves deeper into the mechanisms through which media may shape public perception and influence voter behaviour. The theories presented by Fairclough (1989) and Wodak (2001), who view discourse as a social practice, align closely with the theories of social identity by illustrating how power dynamics and societal structures are reflected and reinforced in media narratives. Accordingly, discourse encompasses social conditions, which can be categorized as the social conditions of production and the social conditions of interpretation. These social conditions are interconnected with three distinct 'levels' of social organization: firstly, the level of the social situation, representing the immediate social context where the discourse unfolds; secondly, the level of the social institution, forming a broader framework within which the discourse operates; and thirdly, the level of society at large, reflecting the broader societal context (Fairclough, 1989). Surface layers of discourse may express specific operations and strategies or govern the ways how communication participants interpret an event (van Dijk, 2006). Journalists, being participants in media discourse, send their readers an intentional and public message hidden in linguistic structures and readers process such a message and take a stance. Finally, social constructionism emphasizes how media discourse is shaped by social and cultural

contexts (van Dijk, 1995). This theory suggests that media messages are not fixed or objective representations of reality but are instead socially constructed and culturally specific. The meanings attributed to media messages are shaped by the cultural and historical contexts in which they are produced and consumed and are constantly evolving as these contexts change.

By integrating these perspectives, it becomes possible to better understand the interplay between media discourse and the construction of political identities.

Research design

As Cotter (2015) recalls the primary approaches to the study of media discourse encompass three broad categories: discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and non-linguistic disciplines. Researchers in media discourse often integrate elements from all three approaches into their work. This study is grounded in non-linguistic discourse as conceptualized within social constructivism, building upon the social identity perspective, and incorporating the hostile media effect as an element of this viewpoint. There is agreement that the hostile media effect is characterized by differing interpretations of media content (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985) that is intended to be neutral, balanced, and fair (Gunther et al., 2001). While it is acknowledged that achieving perfect neutrality or objectivity in news is challenging, these terms are useful in highlighting the essence of what makes this phenomenon intellectually intriguing: the inclination of distinct groups to perceive identical or similar content in markedly different ways (Perloff, 2015). However, for this study, it is very important to note that bias can only be measured in very relative terms as a systematic deviation from the norm or ideal distribution, hence the need to find the boundary of the ideal distribution which in this study forms a kind of imaginary midpoint – a boundary from which deviations can be derived (Bonart et al., 2019). In an attempt to explore comprehensively the issue, this study assesses the coverage of politicians in two media analyses. The first is a balance analysis (assessing visibility, see e.g., van Aelst et al., 2012). The second is a sentiment analysis, showing how the articles were perceived by the readers in the overall context. The study hypothesizes that a combination of unfavourable balance and sentiment towards a politician may produce a multiplier effect, intensifying the perceived negativity of coverage.

In times of crisis, news media are more likely to cooperate voluntarily with officials and authorities, because of patriotism and service to national interests (McQuail, 2013) and will present information about the spread of the virus in terms of the passive role of reception and transmission of information (Christians et al., 2009), rather than reflecting the personal opinions of journalists or editorial staff. Based on this theory, it can be assumed that the news will be less negative towards politicians than under "normal" circumstances. On the other hand, during this period, online news services experienced an unprecedented rise in viewership (adMeter, 2020), and readers searched for available information on various news websites, regardless of their usual preferences which could lead to amplifying the hostile effect in society. Broadening the readership base and the crisis period should consequently maximize accuracy in reporting during the emerging pandemic. Therefore, the beginning of the

pandemic was selected as the research period and the topic was strictly limited to news articles focusing on the spread of the virus, measures and numbers of people infected.

The study period, 1–31 March 2020, coincides with significant political transitions and the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovakia. Initially, Peter Pellegrini, representing the Direction party which was in power during the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, served as Prime Minister. Following the National Council elections on 29 February 2020, with results announced on 1 March, and the escalation of coronavirus coverage beginning on 2 March, a pivotal change occurred. A state of emergency was declared on 16 March, and by 21 March, Igor Matovič, representing a shift in political leadership, assumed the role of Prime Minister. This period is divided into two phases for analysis: P1 from 1 to 20 March under Pellegrini and P2 from 21 to 31 March under Matovič. This timing provides a unique opportunity to compare the media representations of these two leaders from different political spectrums under analogous conditions.

The main research question is *"What is the representation of the two Slovakian politicians and their statements related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakian mainstream media during the initial outbreak period (1-31 March 2020)?"*

This approach not only aims to discern how the media's representation of each Prime Minister might influence public perception and voter behavior during a crisis, offering insights into the dynamic interplay between political leadership and media during critical events, but also integrates the perspective of citizens, who are the ultimate recipients of this information. Hacker and van Dijk (2018, pp. 28-29) highlight the necessity of examining deeper than methodological individualism by involving citizens in the political system, thereby recognizing their critical role in shaping, and responding to media narratives. This analysis serves as an interrogation of the media's representation of prime ministers and acknowledges the crucial position of citizens in navigating the information they receive.

The data were obtained from monitora.cz, a service that archives articles from all Czech and Slovak media. Nine news websites were selected with a threshold of approximately 100,000 unique viewers, as per monitora.cz rating from March 2020. The threshold was selected as it represented a benchmark for the most widely read online media outlets within the study's geographical focus. This criterion was established to ensure that the analysed news portals had significant reach and impact. Other online news portals, which fell well below this threshold, were excluded to maintain a focus on sources that command substantial and broad readership, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the media landscape during the research period.

	Medium	Nb. of Unique Users
1	aktuality.sk	844 450
2	cas.sk	612 590
3	honline.sk	372 530
4	dennikn.sk	326 280
5	tvnoviny.sk	234 050
6	dnes24.sk	179 090
7	sme.sk	114 110
8	pravda.sk	111 010
9	webnoviny.sk	99 600

Figure 1: The Unique users overview (Source: Author)

Articles were selected by the following keywords: Covid-19, Sars-CoV-2, coronavirus, Matovič, Pellegrini. Out of the total number of results displayed, the author then manually selected those that were directly related to the predefined topic. A total of $n=615$ articles related to the topic and containing statements of at least one of the politicians were included in the selection.

Balance analysis

This analysis examines the parity of coverage between the two politicians by comparing the volume of paraphrases and quotations in selected articles. It aims to determine if both figures were accorded comparable visibility and to observe shifts in the quantity and sentiment of their representations during the two periods under review.

RQ₁: "Is there a significant difference in the visibility between the two politicians, with visibility defined as the volume of published paraphrases and quotations attributed to each politician?"

The research question is directed toward detecting disparities in the data sets, seeking evidence of any dissimilarities via similarity analyses.

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): No significant difference exists between the visibility of the two politicians.

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): A significant difference exists between the visibility of the two politicians.

The subsequent analysis adopts an exploratory approach, focusing on the tendencies observed in media coverage. The intent is to investigate potential visibility polarization, characterized by a disparity in the word count attributed to Matovič compared to Pellegrini, despite the latter's longer tenure during the research period.

H₂: The balance analysis is anticipated to reveal a tendency for media outlets to publish more content from Matovič than Pellegrini.

H₃: Cluster analysis is expected to confirm the aggregation of most websites into a dominant cluster without a significant counterpart.

The data were classified into six examined categories, separately for each politician, referred 'M' to Matovič and 'P' to Pellegrini:

- Word count in article paraphrases and quotations for Matovič (AM) and Pellegrini (AP)
- Word count in headline paraphrases and quotations for Matovič (HM) and Pellegrini (HP)
- Word count in article paraphrases and quotations directly pertaining to coronavirus for Matovič (ACOVDM) and Pellegrini (ACOVDP)
- Word count in paraphrases and quotations on topics other than coronavirus in articles (DM, DP)
- Frequency of name mentions and variations in articles (ANM, ANP)
- Frequency of name mentions and variations in headlines (HNM, HNP).

A coding manual was developed to standardize the word counting process for the balance analysis. It outlined the criteria for counting paraphrases, quotations, mentions of politicians, and detailed which words were to be excluded. Only sentences containing a direct quotation or paraphrase from the politicians were included. According to Zelizer (2009), quotations act as gestures of verbal communication. They facilitate the communication of statements that are problematic, risky, or uncomfortable for the speakers. Journalists rely on quotations to make claims without accountability and, as a result, maximize their communication activity. Adopting of quoting helps journalists shape their presentation of news (2009).

The content analysis was performed by six independent coders, all native Slovak speakers, who manually quantified the word counts in the selected articles.

In assessing linear dependence, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated using IBM SPSS19's Partial Correlation function. A preliminary test on the word count for both politicians (AM and AP) during period P1, relative to the total word count in an article, yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.367 for the one-tailed test, with a p-value less than 0.001 for the two-tailed test, suggesting a statistically significant relationship. However, the linear dependence between the variables with the highest word counts (ΣAP , ΣAM) and the total word count in the articles (ΣA) was not confirmed to be strong.

Media	All Words in article	All Words in Headline	AM	AP	ACOVDM	ACOVDP	DM	DP	ANM	ANP	HM	HP	HNM	HNP
tvnoviny.sk	15739	641	2401	1718	2336	1718	65	0	212	178	41	15	6	7
aktuality.sk	28967	714	2681	2536	2681	2547	0	0	242	289	46	34	12	10
cas.sk	28846	981	3760	4178	3699	4178	50	0	274	343	92	58	20	19
dennikn.sk	43091	758	2145	2744	2033	2716	112	28	214	307	33	72	13	15
dnes24.sk	30088	1188	2937	5459	2916	5439	21	26	287	473	44	95	12	15
hnonline.sk	19376	582	2306	2347	2299	2328	7	19	228	225	50	67	15	10
pravda.sk	29083	319	1619	2050	1575	2050	44	0	160	181	16	17	6	3
sme.sk	65311	927	4443	6322	4108	6325	183	99	400	533	78	45	12	12
webnoviny.sk	23407	647	1695	3701	1607	3612	88	89	163	228	38	39	17	17
Overall	283908	6757	23987	31055	23254	30913	570	261	2180	2757	438	442	113	108

Figure 2: Summary of the data results (Source: Author)

The initial step in measuring balance involved summarizing the data from a total of 615 articles, with an overall word count of 283,908. In categories such as the diversity of words used or headline word counts, cardinal values were low, potentially skewing the statistical analysis. Nevertheless, since the dataset encompasses all articles published during the Covid-19 period, representing a complete population rather than a sample, these values are considered in the analysis. Their significance is particularly noted for hierarchical analysis and for examining the dispersion of the variables.

In the data reduction phase, weighted averages were calculated for each media outlet to account for variations in word count. IBM SPSS's Ratio function facilitated this process, producing a weighted average for each category that represents the midpoint for the group. For period P1, weighted averages for Matovič were subtracted from those of Pellegrini for each website; during P2, the calculation was reversed, reflecting Blumler & Kavanagh's (1999) assertion that politicians tend to receive more media coverage as prime ministers. The relative objectivity threshold for each variable was determined using the following formulas:

$$\bar{p} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p1tot1}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot1} - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n m1tot1}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot1}$$

$$\bar{m} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n m2tot2}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot2} - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p2tot2}{\sum_{i=1}^n tot2}$$

(Note: In these formulas \bar{m} and \bar{p} represent the weighted averages for Pellegrini and Matovič, and tot1 and tot2 refer to the total word counts for each of the periods).

A paired sample test compared the politician variables across both periods, revealing differences that were not statistically significant, thereby failing to reject the null hypothesis of set similarity. Notably, the similarity in headline variables for both Matovič and Pellegrini was striking, suggesting that headlines may serve more to draw readers than to convey editorial viewpoints. This high degree of similarity in headlines may also stem from a smaller dataset.

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	AM - AP	-1413,600	2238,492	707,873	-3014,921	187,721	-1,997	9	,077
Pair 2	ACOVIDM - ACOVIDP	-1531,800	2399,516	758,794	-3248,310	184,710	-2,019	9	,074
Pair 3	DM - DP	61,800	94,417	29,857	-5,742	129,342	2,070	9	,068
Pair 4	ANM - ANP	-115,400	174,322	55,125	-240,102	9,302	-2,093	9	,066
Pair 5	HM - HP	-,800	28,844	9,121	-21,433	19,833	-,088	9	,932
Pair 6	HNM - HNP	1,000	2,749	,869	-,966	2,966	1,150	9	,280

Figure 3: Paired sample test: Balance (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

Given the non-significant results of the paired sample test, the analysis progressed to explore the presence of a multiplying effect. Employing agglomerative clustering through the centroid method with Euclidean distance, media samples were categorized by relative balance into three distinct clusters. These clusters were determined after iterative testing and dendrogram interpretation, resulting in a

primary group of similar media (cluster 1), midpoint media leaning towards one pole (cluster 2), and the most deviant media (cluster 3).

Agglomerative clustering was chosen for its methodological robustness and its ability to provide a hierarchical view of the media data. This method starts by treating each data point as a distinct cluster and then progressively merges clusters based on their similarity, which is ideal for identifying natural groupings in the data. By examining how individual media outlets cluster together based on the variables of interest, it is possible to discern patterns that may indicate a multiplying effect in media coverage. Specifically, if media outlets that give more coverage to one politician tend to cluster together distinctly from those that cover the other politician less, it could suggest that the media is amplifying the visibility of one over the other. Agglomerative clustering allows for the exploration of such patterns without pre-specifying the number of clusters, thus providing an unbiased view of how media coverage groups together during the analysis periods.

This method contributes to understanding the potential multiplying effect by revealing whether there's a tendency for media outlets to group together in their coverage patterns, which could indicate a systematic bias or a preference for covering one politician more than another. This clustering can then be analysed to see if it correlates with either the time the politicians were in power (possibly receiving more coverage as prime ministers) or with other factors such as the tone and context of the coverage.

Medium	Clusters P1	Clusters P2
1:aktuality.sk	1	1
2:cas.sk	1	2
3:dennikn.sk	2	2
4:dnes24.sk	3	3
5:hnonline.sk	2	1
6:Relative balance	1	1
7:pravda.sk	2	2
8:sme.sk	1	1
9:tvnoviny.sk	1	3
10:webnoviny.sk	1	1

Figure 4: Clusters balance analysis (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

It is evident that most media remained within their initial clusters. In the first period, five news media were grouped in the relative balance cluster, while four maintained their position in the second period. Notably, at least three media shifted their position, with tvnoviny.cz moving the most significantly. Dnes24.sk, categorized in cluster 3, was distinguished by featuring a higher frequency of Pellegrini's statements. The clustering outcomes indicate that readers were exposed to more statements from Matovič across most media outlets, both in headlines and article content, including mentions of his name. These results lend support to the third hypothesis, suggesting a clustering effect on perceived visibility. However, the findings also imply that the first period exhibited greater balance compared to the second. In essence, when variables are considered in isolation, the effect is not pronounced, but the clustered data reveal shifts that imply a cumulative effect on visibility.

Sentiment analysis

The sentiment analysis aimed to address RQ2: *"Are statements by Peter Pellegrini perceived more negatively compared to those of Igor Matovič?"*

H₀: There is no significant difference in sentiment between the statements of the two politicians.

H₄: There is a significant difference in sentiment between the statements of the two politicians.

H₅: Pellegrini's statements will be perceived more negatively than Matovič's in both articles and headlines.

H₆: Cluster analysis will demonstrate a predominant grouping of media outlets without substantial opposition.

In preparation for the research, a second coding manual dedicated to sentiment analysis was developed. Statements were categorized for analysis as follows:

- Matovič in articles (MA)
- Pellegrini in articles (PA)
- Matovič in headlines (MH)
- Pellegrini in headlines (PH).

The Likert scale was chosen for its gradational nature, ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (5), allowing for a nuanced sentiment assessment (Budak et al., 2016). Following Lutz Hagen's (1995) methodology, normative values were assigned based on truthfulness (encompassing factuality, balance, and diversity), factuality (the requirement for messages to remain factual), balance (equal representation of opinions), and diversity (variety of perspectives). These criteria were quantified, with the aggregate score determining the article's overall sentiment bias, scaled between -2 (very negative) and +2 (very positive). Scores within $\langle -1; 1 \rangle$ were deemed random, signifying a neutral sentiment.

An eleven-member coding team, proficient in Slovak, conducted a reliability test on the manual, ensuring coder neutrality by selecting individuals unaffiliated with the 'For Decent Slovakia' protests. The Cronbach's alpha reliability test yielded high internal consistency scores across all variables (MA=0.988, PA=0.978, MH=0.969, PH=0.994), confirming the manual's adequacy for this sentiment analysis.

A consistent methodology was also employed for headline sentiment analysis, with criteria set to assess: 1) alignment of the headline with the article content; 2) stance or tone of the headline towards the politician; 3) appropriateness of name abbreviation; 4) contextuality of the headline. Unlike article text, randomness in sentiment was not anticipated for headlines, as they are crafted with editorial intent and are expected to have a defined tone.

Headlines were scored on the same $\langle -2; 2 \rangle$ sentiment scale as articles. The reliability of the headline coding was confirmed using the Cronbach's alpha method, yielding high consistency scores for each sentiment category: MA=0.978, PA=0.982, MH=0.973, and PH=0.972.

For the sentiment analysis of 615 articles, three native Slovak citizens residing in the Czech Republic, who abstained from voting in the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections, were employed as coders to ensure a degree of impartiality. Their status as ordinary citizens, combined with their long-term residence outside Slovakia, was intended to minimize any inherent political biases, providing a fresh perspective on the political discourse. Each coder's scores were aggregated to determine an average sentiment value for each media outlet, reflecting relative neutrality. The choice of these citizens, constrained by the availability of Slovak-speaking individuals during the lockdown, was also guided by the belief that their less direct involvement in Slovak politics might lead to a more neutral analysis.

To validate the hypothesis of a more negative media sentiment towards Pellegrini, a paired comparison of sentiment variables was conducted. The sentiments of PA1 and MA2, and PH1 and MH2 were compared, corresponding to the periods when each politician was prime minister. The analysis revealed a significant ($p < 0.001$) difference in sentiment for articles about the prime ministers, allowing for the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) and confirmation of H_4 for this variable. During the period when both politicians were in opposition, the test yielded a p-value of 0.151, indicating a greater similarity in sentiment—though with slightly less variability as reflected in the standard deviation. Despite the higher similarity, the difference is not statistically significant, and thus does not support H_4 .

The analysis of headline sentiments when the politicians were prime ministers indicated a low degree of similarity. However, the sentiment of headlines became more alike when both were in opposition. The degree of similarity in sentiment was found to be directly proportional to the count of instances, which was lowest for the opposition politicians' headlines.

The balance analysis mirrored these findings, suggesting that politicians out of the prime ministerial role are less likely to be featured in headlines. This finding has important implications for understanding the dynamics of media coverage relative to a politician's current role in government.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PA1 - MA2	-,59528416	,36786684	,11632971	-,85844024	-,33212807	-5,117	9	,001
Pair 2	PA2 - MA1	-,12546229	,25310435	,08003862	-,30652224	,05559765	-1,568	9	,151
Pair 3	PH1 - MH2	,07732806	,17280101	,05464448	-,04628633	,20094246	1,415	9	,191
Pair 4	PH2 - MH1	-,00015895	,13168385	,04164209	-,09435990	,09404200	-,004	9	,997

Figure 5: Paired sample test: Sentiment (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

The cluster analysis, following the same methodology as the hierarchical balance analysis, revealed significant shifts in media sentiment between two periods of political leadership in Slovakia. Initially, only four websites were grouped in the neutral first cluster during the first period. In contrast, the second period saw six websites aligning with this neutral cluster, suggesting a shift towards a more uniform media stance.

Medium	Clusters P1	Clusters P2
1:aktuality.sk	1	1
2:cas.sk	1	1
3:dennikn.sk	2	2
4:dnes24.sk	3	1
5:hnonline.sk	1	2
6:pravda.sk	2	1
7:sme.sk	1	1
8:tvnoviny.sk	3	1
9:webnoviny.sk	3	3
10:neutral	1	1

Figure 6: Clusters sentiment analysis (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

Remarkably, one news website, associated with the Slovak News Agency (SITA) and of a commercial nature, stood out as it moved to the third cluster during Matovič's term. This indicates a significant divergence in sentiment from other media outlets. Conversely, dnes24.sk and tvnoviny.sk moved from a cluster indicating a difference in sentiment to one suggesting similarity, signalling a substantial reversal in their portrayal of the politicians.

The movement of these websites between clusters—without corresponding significant social or ownership changes—implies that the change in political leadership, particularly the transition from Pellegrini to Matovič, may have influenced the media's sentiment.

The sentiment midpoint comparison underscores a noticeable shift in the media's attitude toward Peter Pellegrini. There was a marked 45% increase towards a more positive sentiment when he transitioned from the role of Prime Minister to that of an opposition member. In contrast, the sentiment towards Igor Matovič shifted by a mere 8%.

These findings suggest that the media's portrayal of political figures can fluctuate notably depending on their political status, with Pellegrini's coverage becoming significantly more positive once he was no longer Prime Minister. This indicates that media sentiment may be closely tied to the political dynamics and positions of the individuals in question.

Period	variable	MA	PA	MT	PT
1P	neutral	-0,05163	-0,65761	-0,06793	-0,23098
2P	neutral	-0,13765	-0,18623	-0,27126	-0,07287
Difference	neutral	-0,08602	-0,47137	-0,20332	-0,15810
Difference in %	neutral	8%	47%	20%	16%

Figure 7: Comparison of the sentiment midpoints (Source: Author, IBM SPSS 19)

Final assessment

The research findings demonstrate that media representation, in terms of article balance and sentiment, can indeed precipitate a multiplier effect, with both dimensions corroborating a bias against Peter Pellegrini. This phenomenon may have contributed to reinforcing group identity among Pellegrini's supporters, who, in response to the media's portrayal, rallied in defence of the politician. This pattern is supported by a Focus agency survey (15–17 April 2020) with 1,016 participants. When asked *"In your opinion, who manages/managed the fight with the COVID-19 crisis better, the current Prime Minister Igor Matovič, the previous Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, or both equally?"*, 38% favoured Pellegrini over Matovič, who received 22% approval. Notably, while Matovič garnered 55.1% support from his party's voters, Pellegrini secured a 79% backing from his party's electorate. This discrepancy was also evident among voters of nationalist parties, who predominantly supported Pellegrini, in contrast to liberal party voters, who leaned towards Matovič (Marcišiak, 2020).

This study, alongside the Focus survey, reveals that despite receiving less media coverage during the crisis, which was skewed negatively, Pellegrini retained a favourable public perception. Such findings suggest that a reduction in visibility, coupled with adverse sentiment, can amplify a politician's support base.

While the research provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations, particularly regarding the number of coders and their representation. The use of only three coders, due to the limited availability of suitable candidates, means the findings are not intended to be generalized across the entire nation. Moreover, the potential for political bias, despite efforts to minimize it, remains a concern. Future studies might broaden the scope by incorporating a more diverse range of media outlets and coders and exploring the enduring impact of media sentiment on public opinion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has emphasized the crucial role of media perspectives in shaping political narratives within the CEE context. It demonstrates how media narratives, intertwined with voter behaviour as explained by social identity theory, can contribute to the construction and reinforcement of political perspectives. The research hypothesizes that an unfavourable balance and sentiment towards a politician may produce a multiplier effect, intensifying the perceived negativity of coverage. This premise was confirmed, highlighting how compounded negative portrayals can escalate and amplify adverse public perceptions.

The research illuminates the intricate relationship between media representation and social identity dynamics, providing a nuanced view of how media can shape political discourse and influence voter perceptions. This study enhances the understanding of the dynamics between media representation and political narratives, illustrating the media's capacity to influence not only public perception but also the broader political landscape in emerging democracies.

References

- adMeter. (2020 April 11). Slováci v době pandémie sledují média více. *MediaGuru.cz*. <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2020/04/slovaci-v-dobe-pandemie-sleduji-media-vice/>
- Aktuality.sk. (2024 January 26). Valec sa rozbieha. Koalícia v prvom čítaní schválila nižšie tresty a zrušenie špeciálnej prokuratúry. *Aktuality.sk*. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/VYLJZC2/valec-sa-rozbieha-koalicia-v-prvom-citani-schvalila-nizsie-tresty-a-zrusenie-specialnej-prokuratury/>
- Blumler, J. G., & Kavanagh, D. (1999). The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features. *Political Communication*, 16(3), 209–230.
- Bonart, M., Samokhina, A., Heisenberg, G., & Schaer, P. (2019). An Investigation of Biases in Web Search Engine Query Suggestions. *Online Information Review*, 44(2), 365–381.
- Budak, C., Goel, S., & Rao, J. M. (2016). Fair and Balanced? Quantifying Media Bias through Crowdsourced Content Analysis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 250–271.
- Christians, C. G., Glasser, T. L., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, K., & White, R. A. (2009). Normative Theories of the Media. In McChesney, R. W. & Nerone, J. C. (eds.) *Journalism in democratic societies*. University of Illinois Press.
- Cotter, C. (2015). Discourse and Media. In Tannen, D., Hamilton, H. E., & Schiffrin, D (eds.) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dijk, T. A. V. (1995). Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis. In *Language and peace* 1(10), 17–33). Routledge.
- Dinas, E. (2014). Does Choice Bring Loyalty? Electoral Participation and the Development of Party Identification. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(2), 449–465.
- Druckman, J. N., Peterson, E., & Slothuus, R. (2013). How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation. *American Political Science Review*, 107(1), 57–79.
- Enns, P. K., & McAvoy, G. E. (2012). The Role of Partisanship in Aggregate Opinion. *Political Behavior*, 34(4), 627–651.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power* (1st ed.). Longman Inc.
- Hagen, L. M. (1995). Explikation und empirische Operationalisierung von Qualitätskriterien. In *Informationsqualität von Nachrichten. Mefmethoden und ihre Anwendung auf die Dienste von Nachrichtenagenturen*. Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Hartmann, T., & Tanis, M. (2013). Examining the Hostile Media Effect as an Intergroup Phenomenon: The Role of Ingroup Identification and Status: Hostile Media Effect. *Journal of Communication*, 63(3), 535–555.
- Haydanka, Y. (2021). Authoritarization or Democratization: Directions of Electoral Processes in Present-day in Slovakia. *Journal of Comparative Politics*, 14(2), 4–16.
- Holmes, M. (2004). Introduction: The Importance of Being Angry: Anger in Political Life. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7(2), 123–132.
- Hynčica, P., & Šárovec, D. (2018). Slovenské politické strany optikou konceptu Novosti [Slovak Political Parties Through the Lens of the Novelty Concept]. *Acta FF*, 10(2–3), 7–34.
- Ispas, A. (2013). *Psychology and Politics. A social identity perspective*. Taylor & Francis Group.

- Jakubowitz, K., & Sükösd, M. (2008). Twelve Concepts Regarding Media System Evolution and Democratization in Post-Communist Societies. In *Finding the Right Place on the Map. Central and Eastern European Media Change in a Global Perspective*. Intellect.
- Kalin, M., & Sambanis, N. (2018). How to Think About Social Identity. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21(1), 239–257.
- Leška, D. (2013). Hlavné etapy formovania systému politických strán na Slovensku po roku 1989 [Main Stages in the Formation of the Political Party System in Slovakia After 1989]. *Sociológia* 2013, 45(1), 71–88.
- Lodge, M., & Taber, C. S. (2013). *The Rationalizing Voter* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113.
- Mackie, D. M., Devos, T., & Smith, E. R. (2000). Intergroup Emotions: Explaining Offensive Action Tendencies in an Intergroup Context. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(4), 602–616.
- Marcišiak, M. (2020 April 26). Postavil sa koronavírusu lepšie Pellegrini alebo Matovič? Prieskum ukázal zaujímavé výsledky. *Tvnoviny.Sk*, https://tvnoviny.sk/na-telo/clanok/114539-postavil-sa-koronavirusu-lepsie-pellegrini-alebo-matovic-prieskum-ukazal-zaujimave-vysledky?campaignsrc=tn_clipboard
- Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. The University of Chicago Press.
- McQuail, D. (2013). *Journalism and Society*. SAGE Publications.
- Mesežnikov, G. & Gyárfášová, Oľga. (2018). Slovakia's Conflicting Camps. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3).
- Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2013). Controlling Corruption Through Collective Action. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(1), 101–115.
- Perloff, R. M. (2015). A Three-Decade Retrospective on the Hostile Media Effect. *Mass Communication and Society*, 18(6), 701–729.
- Scheepers, Daan, & Derks, B. (2016). Revisiting Social Identity Theory from a Neuroscience Perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 11(October 2016), 74–78.
- Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information*, 13(2), 65–93.
- Trepte, S., & Loy, L. (2017). Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory. *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, 1–13.
- Turner, J. C., Brown, R. J., & Tajfel, H. (1979). Social comparison and group interest in ingroup favouritism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 9(2), 187–204.
- Valentino, N., Brader, T., Groenendyk, E., Gregorowicz, K., & Hutchings, V. (2011). Election Night's Alright for Fighting: The Role of Emotions in Political Participation. *The Journal of Politics*, 73, 156–170.
- Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2012). The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 13(2), 203–220.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2018). INews Media and the Emotional Public Sphere. Toward a Typology of Mediated Anger: Routine Coverage of Protest and Political Emotion. *International Journal of Communication*, 12(2018), 2071–2087.

Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse—Historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 63–94). SAGE Publications.

Wolf, M. R., Strachan, J. C., & Shea, D. M. (2012). Forget the Good of the Game: Political Incivility and Lack of Compromise as a Second Layer of Party Polarization. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *56*(12), 1677–1695.

Vallone, R. P., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *49*(3), 577–585.

Gunther, A. C., Christen, C. T., Liebhart, J. L., & Chia, S. C.-Y. (2001). Congenial Public, Contrary Press, and Biased Estimates of the Climate of Opinion. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *65*(3), 295–320.

Gunther, A. C., & Liebhart, J. L. (2006). Broad Reach or Biased Source? Decomposing the Hostile Media Effect. *Journal of Communication*, *56*(3), 449–466.

Gunther, A. C., Miller, N., & Liebhart, J. L. (2009). Assimilation and Contrast in a Test of the Hostile Media Effect. *Communication Research*, *36*(6), 747–764.

Gunther, A. C., & Schmitt, K. (2004). Mapping Boundaries of the Hostile Media Effect. *Journal of Communication*, *54*(1), 55–70.