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# MEDIA NEGATIVISM AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Andrea Chlebcová Hečková\*

*Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts, B. Slančíkovej 1, 949 74 Nitra, Slovak Republic*

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## Abstract

This article deals with the growing negativism in media, its impact on creation of image of non-elite countries, their emigrants, refugees and Muslims. By using particular examples we bring attention on misuse of prejudices and stereotypes created by media within the political communication and we propose solutions for the problem.

*Keywords:* media, negativism, prejudices, Muslims, political communication

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## 1. Impact of the negativism of news on the image of Muslims

Inclination of media to negativism and sensations has been attracting the attention of Science since the beginning of empirical research at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even when comparing newspaper published in New York from 1881 and 1893, Speed pointed out to a notable increase of the number of news dealing with crimes, criminals and scandals. He evaluated it as a deformation of the fact for the effect of sensations in favour of Penny Press profit [1]. Hans Mathias Kepplinger and Helga Weißbecker also stated the increase of these tendencies when they carried out a research of radio news broadcasted by Hesen radio from 1955 up to 1985. They found out that the proportion of news about negative events during the researched period significantly increased. But they emphasize that this increase is not connected with an increased number of negative events, but with a change of criteria of news selection to be published. According to the authors, on the basis of the actual news people can get a feeling that existing problems increase, that things worse and that the responsible institutions are not able to solve related problems [2].

According to Ivana Polakevičová it can be “*The media reflection of the world, however, distorted, deformed, or intentionally modified*” [3]. The balanced objective reporting is very rare particularly in case of emotional escalated events. This fact is proved also by a research of Peter Szabo et al. about media image of the visit of the Hungarian president in Slovakia in 2009 [4]. Veronika Veverková states the high proportion of negative news, particularly crime and disasters in the Slovak daily tabloid press [5].

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\* E-mail: [acheckova@ukf.sk](mailto:acheckova@ukf.sk)

Winfried Schulz points out that despite the fact that most of criminal acts are committed between famous people in private, without using of weapons, these acts are presented in media as acts between strangers, on the public and with using weapons. They emphasize acts of terrorists, criminality of minority inhabitants and migrants. Deformed presentation of violence and criminality in the media evokes incorrect perceptions on spreading different forms of criminality among public and increases the sense of fear [6]. Film production with high proportion of violence and criminality has the same effect. A thesis of cultivation represented by researchers around George Gerbner assumes that the more the percipients watch TV, the more dangerous is the world they see and more markedly they manifest their desire for law and order. American television is in Gerbner's interpretation presented as an agent of statuesque and political repression [7, 8].

The change of themes also relates to the change of criteria for news selection. Studies regarding the perception of news elaborated by Klaus Merten and George Ruhrmann emphasize that the criteria of relevance which are put on the news by percipients are different than those assumed until now. They examined criteria of news selection by people watching TV during the eighties and nineties of the last century and they found out that actuality and relevance of news were not important, but individual factors, such as negativism, region, personalization and controversy [9]. Also research of values of TV news in Germany carried out in 2002 showed that the proportion of news with factors of aggression, violent images and controversy increased in case of international news [G. Ruhrmann, J. Woelke, M. Maier and N. Diehlmann, *Der Wert von Nachrichten im deutschen Fernsehen. Ein Modell zur Validierung von Nachrichtenfaktoren*. Opladen, 2003, 3, [https://www.lfm-nrw.de/fileadmin/lfm-nrw/Aktuelle\\_Forschungsprojekte/studie-nachrichtenwert.pdf](https://www.lfm-nrw.de/fileadmin/lfm-nrw/Aktuelle_Forschungsprojekte/studie-nachrichtenwert.pdf)].

According to Johan Galtung, the criteria for selection of news such as personalization, focus on elites and negativism, create a cognitive frame which creates an image of reality: that the countries are divided into elite and peripheral, and into good and bad. Negative things happen in peripheral countries such as disasters, violence, wars and supporters of elites in rich countries bring help and peace [10]. If we learn something about the inhabitants of non-elite countries, it is mostly limited to negative information about wars, chaos and natural disasters [11].

According to Jozef Musil the motives of news negativism can be different: from criticism of journalists as watchdogs of democracy, up to indoctrination of negative image of world with an effort to manipulate public opinion and decrease the interest in participation, up to the increase of subconscious fear of disasters numbing the perception of viewers [12].

Impact of the image of non-elite countries in media is also reflected on the image of emigrants. Due to continuous news about the Islamic State and its activities in Arabic countries and in Africa, most refugees are considered to be of Islam religion, although this fact is not so clear, because also Christians run from war. Moreover, as stated by Martina Křížková, in case of Muslims "*their*

*diversity, which is understood only negatively, is emphasized. Journalists provide only very few opportunities to learn more about Muslims. Readers who in general probably do not have own unmediated experience with Muslims, get only fragmentary and not very positive information with predominance of conflict without deeper context. Upsetting is particularly emphasis on diversity without other possibilities to understand it.” [13] For example, according to Kateřina Kantorová, in 2004, during the mosque ‘fight’ in České Teplice the profile of Arab was changed “from an image of a rich and welcome spa guest to the image of someone who is to be feared, because the Arab ‘belongs’ to the same group as the ones who commit assassinations” [14].*

Also Christian Kolmer and Roland Schatz from the international organization Mediatenor state that “*negative media image of Islam reaching already a level of 67% after the Madrid bomb attacks of March 11, 2004. But the year 2014 has witnessed a new low in the tonality towards Islam (72%). The media-focused violence perpetrated by Boko Haram and IS has triggered not only a significant increase in the volume of reporting but a further deterioration in tone. Coverage of Islam thus reached a new quality of hostility in 2014.*” [C. Kolmer and R. Schatz, *Openness for Dialogue Reached a New Low*, Mediatenor, Annual Dialogue Report, 2015, 6, [http://www.mediatenor.cz/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ADR\\_2015\\_LR\\_WEB\\_PREVIEW.pdf](http://www.mediatenor.cz/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ADR_2015_LR_WEB_PREVIEW.pdf), accessed 16.07.2015]

Negative news about Muslims and Islam in Slovak media are particularly related to foreign news, as we have already mentioned, mostly negative news about terrorists and wars prevail. An example which was also addressed by the Press Council of the Slovak Republic in the past years was the headline on the front page of the tabloid *Nový čas* of 26 June, 2013: *Horolezec Šperka (57). Islam mu vzal dcéru aj život. (Cliffhanger Šperka (57). Islam took his daughter and his life)*. In the filed complaint the claimant stated that the heading “*expressly lies, because Islam did not kill, but the terrorists*”. He further stated that “*it evokes dangerous hateful emotions within the society towards Islam and its peaceful followers. This act of the tabloid is particularly dangerous at the time when hate to this religion is spread in the society.*” [Press Council of the Slovak Republic, *Decision No. 08/2013*, <http://trsr.sk/rozhodnutia/rozhodnutie-082013>, accessed 16.07.2015] According to the Editor-in-chief of the tabloid, the headline was absolutely legitimate: it expresses the ideological base of the killers act with a certain degree of exaggeration - Islam and jihad and the fact that his daughter converted to Islam. However, an executive body in the field of ethical self-regulation stated that the headline violated the Code of Ethics and the executive body expressed its concern. Pursuant to the Article III (The journalist and the public, par. 6) “*Headlines of the articles or programs can not be misleading and untruth. The same applies to sneak previews and advertisements which promote these articles and programs.*” Pursuant to the Article IV (The journalist and an object of his interest, par. 3) “*Journalist does not incite to hate, discrimination and stereotypes based on race, religion, ethnical origin, age, social position or sexual orientation. The journalist can inform about the membership to a minority only in case that this information is*

relevant within the context of respective article.” [<http://trsr.sk/rozhodnutia/rozhodnutie-082013>] To the decision of the Press Council of the Slovak Republic we would also assign the need of impartiality, balance and objectivity in compliance with the Article II (Basic Values).

However, the fear of the inhabitants of Europe which is not supported by unambiguous facts based on prejudices and stereotypes from refugees and Muslims as a source of possible terrorist attacks, murders and defenders of Sharia law, etc, has already been established. According to one of the last researches of Polis agency, in June 2015, almost 70% of respondents declared against acceptance of refugees, while the refugees presented a threat to security to more than 63% [SITA, *Utečencov na Slovensku nechceme, bojíme sa ich*, 17.6.2015, <http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/clanok/964362-utecencov-na-slovensku-nehceme-bojime-sa-ich/>, accessed 16.07.2015]. This research was carried out at the time when many politicians expressed their attitudes regarding the issue of refugees in media. Therefore, it is not possible to confute the assumption that the negative attitude of respondents was influenced not only by the negative image of refugees presented in media but also by the opinions of politicians and vice versa.

## 2. Prejudices and stereotypes in political communication

As noted by many theorists (among all of them we would like to mention Postmann, Schulz, Plasser, Mayer, Luhmann, Jarren, Donges, Habermas, Rucht, Zasepa, Iłowiecký, and others), political communication adapts to the logic of media: their negativism, personalization, controversy, focus on sensations, fear and fun. Politicians try to ensure interest of media by controversial behaviour. Particularly tabloid and commercial media present political leaders as Adonises, lovers of animals and heroes [15]. In connection with the coming election of the National Council of the Slovak Republic which will take place in March 2016, the political party will also use advertising for communication with public.

Their communication starts to be problematic at the moment when they start to use false, distorted and negative news and misuse fear and prejudices of the public only in order to obtain preferences, and especially at the time of escalating violence in the world. Bewildering is a fact that it is not done by extreme ideologically oriented politicians, such as the ultra-nationalist Marián Kotleba, and politicians whose political parties have low voting preferences, but also by educated politicians from political parties with a stable electorate. Not only media, but also political ethics suffers because of negativism.

For example, in the recent years we have met with misuse of prejudices of the society against a minority population within a political campaign of SDKÚ-DS and their presentation, at the press conference in July 2012, of the issue of illegal construction of ‘black buildings’ in the Roma settlement. Despite the fact that illegal buildings can be found out also among houses of rich representatives of the majority population, the political party, which in this year lost a great per

cent of its electors, raised this issue on prejudices against the Roma population [15].

In June 2013 the prime minister of the Slovak Republic and the chairman of the governing political party SMER - Róbert Fico - wanted to reject the problem of Slovakia with high unemployment by statements built on stereotypes about not the working Roma people [SITA, *Róbert Fico má v nezamestnanosti jasno, skresľujú ju Rómovia*, 06.06.2013, <http://www.webnoviny.sk/ekonomika/romovia-zhorsuju-nezamestnanost-let/683802-clanok.html>]. But as far as many long-time unemployed Roma people are not registered in the Labour Office, they can not increase statistics about unemployment. According to INEKO institute, the prejudices presented on the basis of racism will not solve a problem of unemployment of marginalized inhabitants [V. Folténová, *Fico vidí za vysokou nezamestnanosťou Rómov. Štátny inštitút hovorí niečo iné*, 17.02.2014, <http://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/7106594/fico-vidi-za-vysokou-nezamestnanostou-romov-statny-institut-hovori-nieco-ine.html>, accessed 16.07.2015].

The chairman of the political party NOVA who was a member of Christian political party KDH for many years, Daniel Lipšic, stated in the political discussion program *V politike* (In Politics) broadcasted by TA3 on Sunday 18 January, 2015 the following: “*I do not know that there have been some violent crimes or terrorist offences committed by Christians or Jews in Europe. They have been committed only by Muslims, let’s say it very openly.*” [M. Sloboda and V. Hincová Frankovská, *Povedzme si otvorene, pán Lipšic, nie sú to len moslimovia*, Denník N, 21.01.2015, <https://dennikn.sk/30775/povedzme-si-otvorene-pan-lipšic-nie-su-len-moslimovia/>, accessed 16.07.2015] The drama of increasing number of refugees and migrants in the last year was also misused in his favour by the prime minister of the Slovak Republic and the chairman of governing party SMER Róbert Fico. At the press conference held on 27 May, 2015 he warned against a terrorism wave: “*Let us realize that Libya is in absolute break-up; it does not exist as a state. There are several governments, wars, they kill people there.*” According to him, there is a threat that together with the refugees coming to Europe also people “*who are not coming here to work or to have better lives, but to spread terrorism*” are coming [SITA, *S utečencami môže prísť aj vlna terorizmu, varuje Fico*, 27.05.2015, <http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/clanok/957137-s-utecencami-moze-prist-aj-vlna-terorizmu-varuje-fico/>, accessed 16.07.2015].

According to authors of the Internet page demagog.sk the abovementioned politicians forget the terrorist act of ‘Christian cultural activist’ Andres Brevik in July 2011 in Norway and the acts of the separatist groups IRA and ETA which do not have Muslim background. They refer to the statistics of terrorist attacks in Europe collected by Europol since 2006. From the total number of terrorist attacks in Europe, Muslims are responsible only for two per cent [O. Wheaton, *The number of terrorists who are actually Muslim or religiously motivated will surprise you*, 15.01.2015, <http://metro.co.uk/2015/01/15/the-number-of-terrorists-who-are-actually-religiously-motivated-will-surprise-you-5023616/>, accessed 30.09.2015]

Few days later, on 31 May 2015, in the discussion program *O 5 minút 12* (Five minutes to twelve) broadcasted by the first television channel of the Radio and Television Slovakia, the Slovak member of the European Parliament and the chairman of the liberal political party SAS, Ruchard Sulík, used created stereotypes and accused all migrants that they want to live from social benefits of the states of the European Union [SITA, *Žit' v EÚ nie je prirodzeným právom, odkázal utečencom Sulík*, 31.05.2015, <http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/356879-zit-v-eu-nie-je-prirodzenym-pravom-odkazuje-utecencom-sulik/>]. He also confirmed his prejudices against migrants from Africa in his statements regarding their lack of education. "They do not have universities in Africa or a system of education which could ensure education of these people." [L. Zagibová, *Sulík a Kaliňák sa zhodli chybami a neznalosťou*, Denník N, 03.06.2015, <https://dennikn.sk/150737/zhoda-postavena-na-chybach/>, accessed 16.07.2015] The Minister of Interior, a member of the political party SMER, Robert Kaliňák, contested the right of refugees to a better life by contesting life conditions of the inhabitants of Europe by his words: "Europeans, including Slovaks, do not have the right to a good life and all other people have this right in the name of a false solidarity" [TASR, *R. Kaliňák: navrhované riešenie prerozdeľovania utečencov je pokrytecké*, 31.05.2015, <http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/kalinak-sulik-rtvs-utecenci-o-5-minut-12/137892-clanok.html>].

However, the web page [demagog.sk](http://demagog.sk) again drew attention to his misleading statements by pointing out to the facts that there are 290 universities in Africa covered by the Association of African Universities and that the literacy rate in Africa is from 68.5% in Morocco up to 91% in Libya, and to the fact that the University in Cairo belongs to 500 top universities in the world. According to Lenka Zagibová the problem in the case of Richard Sulík and Róbert Kaliňák was the fact that "top politicians base their arguments on incorrect generalization, exaggeration, haunting or even elementary ignorance". She emphasizes that also according to the European Commission we can not generalize the African migrants [<http://www.demagog.sk/diskusie/534/?politik=26&ph=2>].

Despite the fact that the public broadcasting institution Radio and Television Slovakia tried to balance the unbalanced discussion of both politicians directed against migrants by the presence of ethnologist Mrs. Helena Tužinská who introduced viewers to the history of migration and positive impacts of other cultures on European culture and by the live input of Mr. Hassan Mahmoud, a Syrian Kurd living in Slovakia, the result of the discussion was the clear and univocal attitude of both politicians against migration full of prejudices and stereotypes.

Information on dangerous foreigners and minority presented by standard politicians and media is subsequently used by representatives of ultra-nationalist and nationalist groups for organization of mass protests which still more often look like meetings of Nazi political parties at the time before the Second World War. And preferences of the parties thinking in this way increase with the upcoming elections.

Paradoxically, also Czech independent politician of Moravian-Japanese-Korean origin Tomio Okamura builds his political Public Relations on the wave of fear from refugees [U. Bacchi, *Czech far-right leader Tomio Okamura urges citizens to walk pigs near mosques to defend country from Islam*, International Business Times, 05.01.2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/czech-far-right-leader-tomio-okamura-urges-citizens-walk-pigs-near-mosques-defend-country-islam-1481888>, accessed 16.07.2015]. Many politicians also use social networks for presentation of their attitudes, such as Facebook or Twitter, which in contrast to media, are not modified by editors and so questioning the statements presented by these networks are on percipients.

### **3. Conclusions**

There have been many solutions of this problem presented in theoretical publications. Although the public media and reputable print media will try to present a wide spectrum of opinions, the analysis of real problems of the world, they will elaborate documents about peaceful coexistence of different religious and race groups, about wars and poverty of countries where the refugees are coming from, but they will still have to cope with negativism - bias (negative bias, distortion) and popularity of tabloid and commercial media that simplify political problems into a special mix of entertainment and negative superficial news.

But as far as people still listen to authorities, it would be very good if these authorities are given as much media space as possible and try to address people. But here it is necessary to appeal particularly on their humanity, moral, cultural, political and religious view and tolerance.

We positively assess web projects of the type like demagog.sk where they draw attention to false statements of the politicians. However, these web projects need to be promoted. To increase interest of public, we also consider important the education of public in the field of Humanities.

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