

2009: First Internet Election Year in Slovakia Case study of Presidential, European and Regional Elections

**Branislav Ondrášik
Faculty of Media
Bratislava School of Law**

ABSTRACT

With the rising professionalization in Slovak election campaigning the Internet (as Web 1.0), user-generated content, and Web 2.0 social networking play ever-increasing roles. The rising relevance of this multimedial as a campaign and news tool is closely connected to the rising penetration of the Internet. By 2005 11,5 percent of Slovak households were connected to the Internet while in 2007 the number jumped to 34,5 percent and in early 2008 it was reaching almost 60 percent. In 2009, three elections have taken place in Slovakia. First in March and April there were two rounds of presidential elections. It was the first Election campaign in the history of the country where Web has played a major role. All major presidential hopefuls discovered that Internet is a useful tool. Not limited to regular Web, social networking and the blogosphere were also important. For example: opposition candidate Iveta Radičová had more than 17.000 Facebook supporters. The web was a major campaign medium two months later – during the European Election Campaign. This part of the paper is expected to be the most explanatory. All the major parties have created special websites, as did many MEP candidates. However Web 2.0 was lesser factor than in the presidential election. CENMEP project data will be used for the analysis of European Election in Slovakia and will be empirically rich in its analysis. Regional Elections took place in Slovakia in November and Web campaigning started as early as September. The paper is a large comparison study of various elections in the 2009 Election year, including but not limited to the European Elections. It draws parallels and the aim is to find out whether Internet and Web 2.0 is more appealing in any of those, what tools have been used.

KEYWORDS

Slovakia - Internet – Slovak online environment – Online news media – Online campaign – Web 2.0 – social networks – elections – European parliament – presidential - regional

Introduction

The aim of this research paper is to describe and analyze how the Internet and social networking have been used in political communication and campaigning for the Slovak presidency, European parliament elections, and regional elections.

The paper is split into four chapters. The first introduces general background on internet use in Slovakia since it was first deployed in 1991 and the first commercial online news media deployment in 1994 with the daily SME. And the penetration and internet use is rising. When in 2005, according to the Statistical office of the Slovak Republic, 11,5 percent of Slovak households have been connected to the Internet, at the beginning of 2008 it was already 58,5 percent. Portions of this chapter introduce the online news media in Slovakia which are at the forefront of Internet popularization in the country. The second introductory sub-chapter is a background on the Slovak political system, such as electoral procedures, election laws and political parties.

The second chapter provides examples of web campaigning from the U.S. which can serve as a comparison for subsequent analysis of Slovak experiences.

The third chapter firstly introduces the reader to the 2009 election year. The first part of the chapter provides a coherent and complex analysis of the campaigning process for Slovak Presidency for the two voting rounds in 2009. It stresses the increasing importance of the Internet. The rising penetration of this multimediu is the reason that large portion of the campaign and news coverage is taking place online. News portals (many of the traditional news outlets) created special sub-portals for election news and all of the campaign teams tried to – more or less – use the advantages of the free Internet for their respective campaigns. Especially the campaign of opposition candidate Iveta Radičová was especially effective in deploying an online campaign in the form of Web 2.0 as well.

The second part of this chapter is largest in scope and presents online campaigning and communication in Slovakia ahead of the European elections. Data used in this chapter were obtained through the European-wide Comparative European New Media and Elections Project (CENMEP) that is focused on online media use in the 2009 European parliament election campaign. The project is part of COST A30 initiative: East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media Research Agenda. Data on multimedia use were acquired through coding of political parties, campaign and candidates websites. It provides indicators and data on how were the blogs used, the multimedia and user-generated content – including, video, photograph and other. In many cases it provides breakdown how various features were used by national parliamentary (governing and opposition parties) and non-parliamentary groups. It focuses on the informational value of the content as well, how effective or ineffective were the parties and candidates in using marketing and interactive features. And as a substantial part is devoted to the use of YouTube and Facebook, many of these data were not part of CENMEP project.

The shortest sub-chapter offers short description of the regional elections campaign specifically in Bratislava and which candidate was the most effective in online campaigning. This is followed by a conclusions segment.

1 Slovak online media and political environment

1.1. History, development and background of online media

The Internet started to be commercially deployed in 1991 as the U.S.National Science Foundation lifted restrictions against commercial Internet use in 1991 (Brody, 2002, p. 249-251). A year later Congress conceptualized this idea as it officially granted full authority for commercial use of NSFNET, as the Internet was then called, and opened it up as a forum of expression of all kinds (Management of Internet Names and Addresses, 1998). Slovakia was one of the leaders in deploying the Internet within the Central European region. Already in 1990 the networks FIDO and EUNet were present in Czechoslovakia (Škop, 2009). The first bundle that was connected with the bundle in Vienna was in Bratislava (Vrabec, 2002). Since 1991, Czechoslovakia was connected to the network BITNET. It did not take long for the idea of online newspapers to materialize. Since 1994 daily SME published its online edition on the portal of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. SME got its domain SME.sk in 1996 and two years afterwards other notable news websites of the mainstream newspapers like Pravda.sk (of the daily Pravda) or HNX.sk (later HNonline.sk of the daily Hospodárske noviny) have been established. SME was one of the first news portals in Central Europe.

In 2005, according to the Statistical office of the Slovak Republic, 11,5 percent of Slovak households have been connected to the Internet, while in 2007 the number jumped to 34,5 percent (Brečka & Ondrášik, 2009). The use of internet in Slovakia increases exponentially, as at the beginning of 2008 it is already at 58,5 percent. With the rise of broadband access, a dramatic rise in the number of the online visitors of Slovak websites followed.

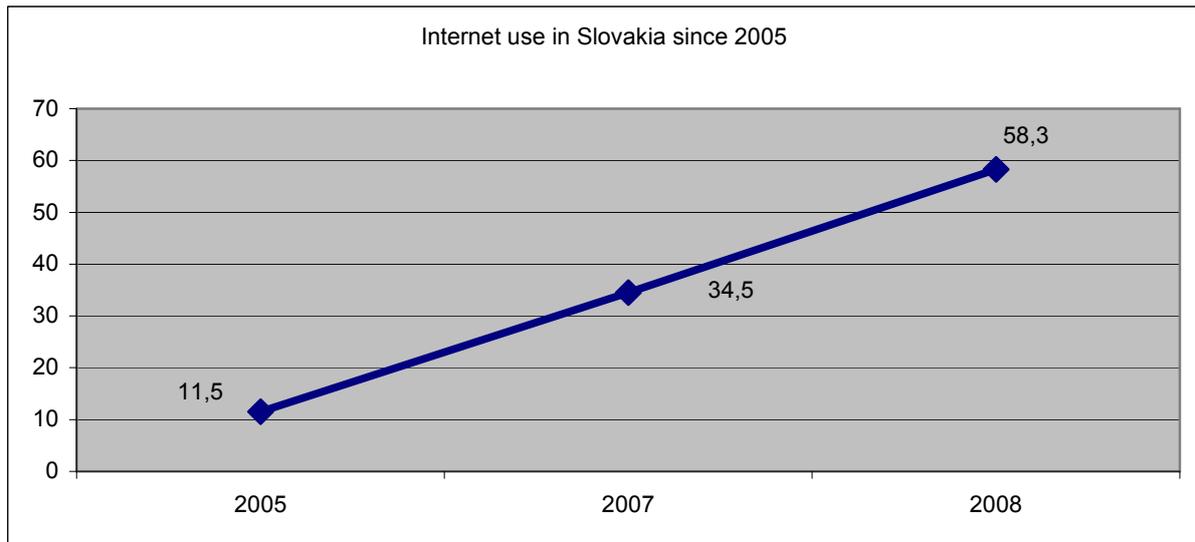
Interesting to note is also the time how much is spent by Slovaks online. According to the polling agency GfK Slovakia, not only more than half of all Slovaks are connected to the internet, but they spent online approximately 2 and half hours. Which is only 15 to 20 percent than in countries of Western Europe (Doktor, 2009). More and more people are connected not only through broadband but via mobile operators' third generation (3G) networks.

The first media outlets present in the newly created Slovak cyberspace were ultimately the news media, foremost the print media and just at later point has started to be used for marketing communication, advertising, campaigning and political communication in that regard. Actually, as this paper will show, 2009 was the first election year that can be dubbed as the year of internet campaigning.

News has been present in the Slovak Internet environment since 1994, just one year after the independent Slovak Republic had been created and four years after the collapse of communism. The first newspaper which went online was SME and the most popular news-based portal in Slovakia is SME.sk, online sister of the print newspaper SME. Through the years its readership more than doubled. When in 2005 it had recorded 449.000 unique visitors, in 2007 it had more than doubled and in 2008 it was, on average, read by 970.000 people per month. With regards to the exponential growth, this was the case of other news portals as well. However, the starting positions were different. Pravda.sk had 212.000 visitors in 2007, today it is more than a double of that number – 460.000 in

2008. HNOnline of Hospodárske noviny had a readership of 40.000 unique visitors in 2005, by 2008 this number more than quadrupled to 167.000. The list would not be complete without Bleskovky.sk (and their heirs Topky.sk and Cas.sk) which was a joint venture of the popular search engine Zoznam.sk and most read print tabloid Nový Čas. Bleskovky started with 444.000 unique visitors in 2008 and ended its presence on Slovak Web in 2008 with more than double this number – 890.000 unique visitors.

Figure 1: Households connected to the internet in Slovakia since 2005



Source: Slovak Statistical Office, data compiled by Branislav Ondrášik

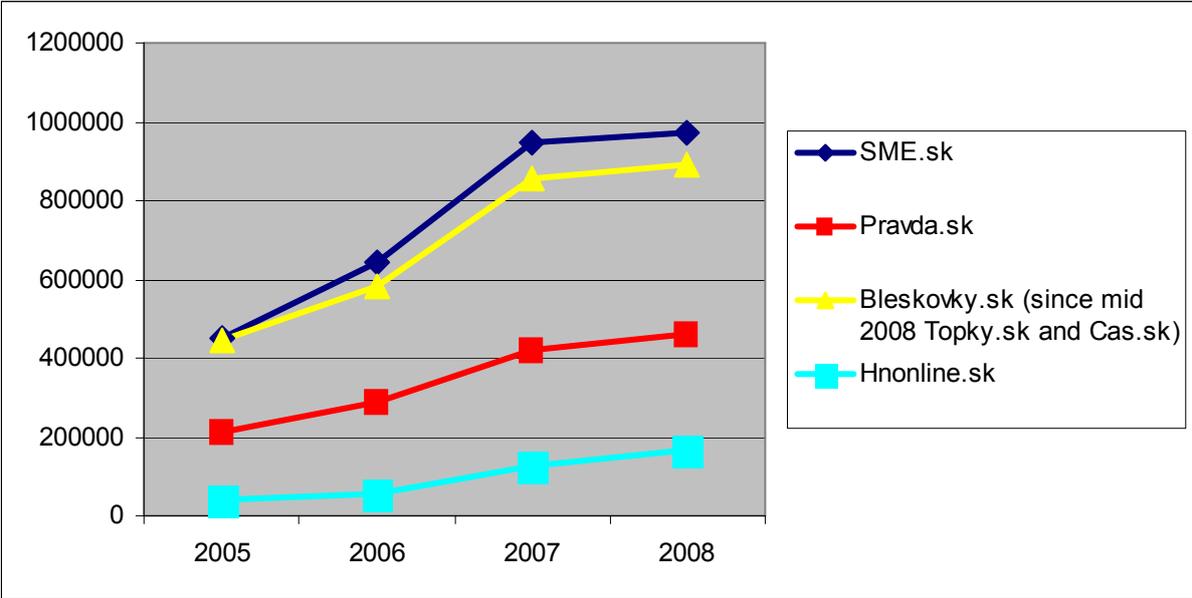
The news portal of the Slovak daily SME is the frontrunner and trend-setter of the Slovak online news. It went online in 1994 through the Slovak Academy of Sciences, registering its own domain in 1996 (through Gratex). In 1999 it started to use its own web-based news – continuous news updates from wire services throughout the day. In 2001 it acquired popular email provider Post.sk and in 2004 the most popular Slovak and Central European blogging system Blog.SME.sk went online. In 2006 it created its own Digg-like service with vybrali.SME.sk, in 2007 went even further by deploying SME Television. However already in 2004 it was providing readers with video-news which was made available through a deal with a Slovak news channel TA3. At this very moment it has dozens of projects under the SME.sk brand (e.g. volby.sme.sk, kultura.sme.sk, sport.sme.sk etc.) and affiliated domains (post.sk, inzeraty.sk, praca.sk, leaders.sk, ujszo.com, vasarnap.com, mynoviny.sk, korzar.sk, echonoviny.sk, spectator.sk – merging all of the ventures of the Petit Press Media House).

SME.sk is not stopping and has many plans for the future. It is acquiring new portals like Natankuj (news about the petrol prices) and Primar (health-related news). It has developed a unique business strategy. They buy web-portals that are not hugely popular but they expect them to do dramatically better under the SME.sk brand. Their experience is that after merging with SME, their readership grows exponentially from five to ten times. Unlike SME's chief print competitor Pravda, they do not plan to invest into social networks (they have vast communities of 12-thousand bloggers and 100-thousand active discussion board members).

Pravda started its online subsidiary Pravda.sk in 1998. It always promoted the idea of leaving most of the exclusivity of the content to the printed medium. Its economic strategy is different from its main benchmark competitor SME.sk. Unlike SME.sk, they invest in social networks and they see community as their biggest potential for growth. Their first acquisition was in the form of the social network Birdz.sk and actually it was for the first time a print media off-shoot affiliated itself with social networking in the region of Slovakia. It has held talks with other portals and projects; however the economic crisis slowed down the growth. There are other news portals in their portfolio brought mostly by DMGT activities before it owned Pravda – especially in the segment of the classifieds press and portals (Profesia.sk, Autovia.sk and Avizo.sk). The foremost aim of Pravda.sk is to gain strength on the relevant market and acquire at least the position that printed Pravda has in its own market segment.

Figure 2: Unique visitors of Four Slovak News Portals 2005-2008

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	2005	2006	2007	2008
SME.sk	449000	642000	949000	970000
Pravda.sk	212000	288000	421000	460000
Bleskovky.sk (since mid 2008 Topky.sk and Cas.sk)	444000	584000	855000	890000
Hnonline.sk	40000	57000	129000	167000

Source: iAudit and AIM Monitor/MediaResearch 2005-2008, data compiled by Branislav Ondrášik

1. 2 Background on Slovak Political system

There are several types of elections that are taking place in the Slovak Republic. The country is a parliamentarian democracy with a strong role of the government lead by the Prime Minister. Elections are held within a proportionate system. Most important are the parliamentary elections, next will be held in 2010. Slovakia is a party system, the voter votes rather for the party than a candidate from the party list. However, constitutionally, voter votes for the candidate on the party list.

In 2009, three elections took place: presidential elections, European elections and regional elections. Local elections for local councils and mayors should be held in the fall of 2010. Campaign moratorium of 48 hours is in place ahead of the vote for the European, regional, local and presidential elections. This moratorium was skipped in the new Law that directs the voting procedure for the general parliamentary elections. In parliamentary, European, and presidential elections, the candidates are campaigning nationally as Slovakia is considered as one district for these elections. For the candidates, there is always few weeks ahead of the vote to sign up – petition for the election. Elections in Slovakia are mostly held over the weekends – Friday afternoon, Saturday or Sunday.

Slovak Political parties that were selected in parliamentary, European or regional elections:

SMER-Social Democracy (SMER-SD) – left, socialist, in the government and national parliament, opposition, in the European parliament, leftist **S&D**.

Slovak Democratic and Christian Union - Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) – center/right, pro-reform, in the national parliament, opposition, in the European parliament, right-wing **EPP**.

Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) – conservative, in the national parliament, opposition, in the European parliament, right-wing **EPP**.

Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK-MKP) – Hungarian, right, in the national parliament, opposition, right-win, in the European parliament, right-wing **EPP**.

Slovak National Party (SNS) – far right, nationalist, in the government and national parliament, in the European parliament, eurosceptic **EFD**.

People's Party - Movement for Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS) – party of the authoritarian prime minister Vladimír Mečiar, center, in the government and national parliament, in the European parliament, liberal **ALDE**.

Most-Híd – Hungarian, center, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

HZD – Movement for Democracy, party of president Ivan Gašparovič, center/left, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Freedom Forum (SF) – liberal right, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Conservative Democrats of Slovakia (KDS) – very conservative and eurosceptic, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Civic Conservative Party (OKS) - conservative and eurosceptic, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) – communist, non-national parliament.

Green Party (SZ) – green, opposition, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Green Party of Slovakia (SZS) – green, pro-government, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) – neoliberal, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Liga - Civic Liberal Party (Liga-OLS) – liberal, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Mission 21 - Party of Christian Solidarity – right, non-national parliament.

Party of Democratic Left (SDL') – left, non-national parliament.

Democratic Party (DS) – center/right, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Romany Initiative of Slovakia (RIS) - Romany, non-national parliament.

Roma Party Coalition – Romany, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Agrarian Party of Countryside (ASV) – Agrarian, non-national parliament.

New Democracy (ND) – regional/local, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Civic candidates (OK) - regional/local in Bratislava, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Úsvit – communist, in regional parliaments, non-national parliament.

Independents - in regional parliaments.

2 Political campaigning and the Web

Successful political communication and in more narrow sense political marketing is dependable from tools that are used. Especially the phenomena of Americanization is of great interest. Lilleker (2006 p. 30-33) explains Americanization as when political communication has become more strategic, more organized, more professional. He picks up several processes and tools: for example narrowcasting (individually tailored marketing communication), negativity in advertising, globalisation, coordinated campaigns, use of market intelligence, and especially communication that is focused on media. Here the internet comes into play. The Internet plays a rather minor but ever increasing role in Slovak campaigning. The frontrunner in using online campaigning and social networking is, as Lilleker indicated, the U.S. political campaigning.

U.S. Pew Research Center concluded that in 2008, more people in the U.S. were getting their news for free online than they paid for in buying newspapers or magazines. According to Pew, in comparison with the 2004 U.S. presidential elections, three times more people in 2008 said that Internet is a key source of their campaign information. According to their data, in the 2008 cycle, 33 percent of people were following the campaign and election through the Internet. For comparison, cable news channels were attracting 46 percent of Americans and even smaller was the number for national networks.

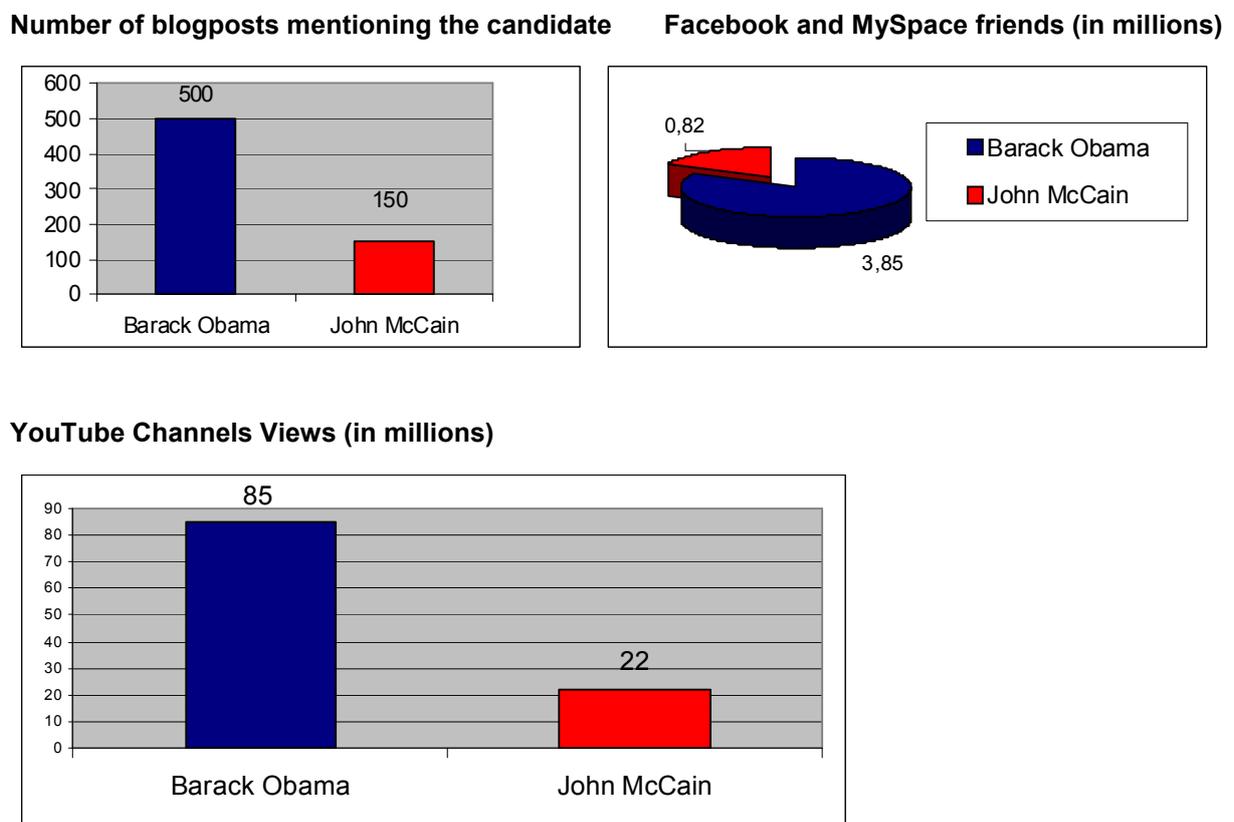
Especially the 2008 U.S. election showed that “Web 2.0”, meaning applications that allow more user-generated content, interactivity and networking, play ever-increasing roles in political campaigning, communication, and fundraising. The Internet is not a third or second-tier medium in this regard. Internet communication catapulted the first African American President Barack Obama into the White House, allowed him to speak to millions of voters, and allowed him to create the greatest network of volunteers ever. His online strategist during the primary season was Joe Rospars, who was visible already in the 2004 election campaign of Howard Dean, where he explored the first social networks like Meetup.com or Friendster for political campaigning. Another important member of his team was Chris Hughes, one of the co-founders of Facebook, that created a campaign social network of its own MyBarackObama.com which at the end of the process communicated to 1,5 million registered users. They have organized 150-thousands events related to the campaign and created 35-thousand Obama fan groups. Altogether, the server recorded more than 3 million donors and internet allowed Obama to fundraise 600 million dollars.

As was stated at the beginning of this chapter, the web was focused on the elections. YouTube co-organized along with CNN its presidential debates; on the other hand ABC News aligned itself with Facebook, and MySpace organized its own series of primaries.

For non-believers in the power of internet and Web 2.0, some raw data: the blogosphere was all about the elections and campaigns as Obama or John McCain were mentioned in 650 million U.S. blogposts. Social network MySpace attracted 1,07 million followers of both candidates and on Facebook this number was 3,6 million. Channels of Obama and McCain on YouTube were viewed 107-million times from the start to the finish of the election campaign.

Indeed, online marketing is a very useful tool as especially Web 2.0 is a free (or low cost) medium, it allows instant feedback, so the communication is not one sided and it allows the campaign to use viral marketing.

Figure 3: Comparing Obama and McCain Web-campaigns



Source: ONDRÁŠIK, B. 2008. Vol'by vyhrál Obama.com. . [Accessed 26 April 2009]. SME.sk, 12 November 2009. Available from World Wide Web <http://www.sme.sk/>.

3 Slovakia: Online campaigns in the 2009 Election Year

The 2009 Election year in Slovakia was the first to deploy online marketing and communication in a relatively major way. There were three elections held in Slovakia in 2009: in March and April were the first and second round of presidential elections and in June it was the elections to

the European parliament and in November there were two rounds of regional elections (elections of regional parliaments and regional leaders). This case study will offer hints and real data on where the online political communication during campaign/election time was moving and how various parties and candidates deployed it.

Before I will start the discussion, some notes on limitations and restrictions of election campaigning in 2009 in Slovakia. How many marketing tools were used and how often is limited by several election laws that constrain the official campaign time, put forward campaign moratoria, do or do not require public service broadcasters to air campaign ads of the parties and in case of presidential elections, they limit the campaign financially as well. Official time is set from 11 to 19 days but is generally ignored by the parties and candidates, however this period is important for example in case of financial limits as the law require the candidates to provide breakdown of their campaign finances. Other limits for campaigning are indirectly set by public service broadcasters and commercial. Commercial broadcasters may provide air time for candidates to debate (this had happened in nine cases of 2009 presidential debates (three debates aired on Markíza/CME-Time Warner, three on JOJ-J&T Media Enterprises and three on the news channel TA3/Kmotrík Group). Public service broadcasters – Slovak Television and Slovak Radio – have to provide air time for the parties/candidates according to law, mostly they opt either for interviews, debates (presidential elections) or round-table style of discussions (European and regional elections). *Figure 4* provides breakdown of the limitations and restrictions in campaigning.

Figure 4: Official campaign limitations and restrictions

	Presidential 1 round	Presidential 2 round	European	Regional 1 round	Regional 2 round
Financial restrictions	132.775 euros, with second round	132.775 euros with the first round	no	no	no
Campaign time	13 days	11 days	19 days	15 days	11 days
Campaign moratoria	48 hours	48 hours	48 hours	48 hours	48 hours
Free advertising air-time	no	no	Yes, on PSB	no	no
Candidate TV debates together	6	4	3	12	0
Prime-time TV debates	6	4	3	0	0

Source: Branislav Ondrášik, 2009

Having said that, the campaign limitations for example in form of moratoria is set only for broadcast and daily print media, not for outdoor media like billboards – except if the campaign wished to put up new advertising outdoor during the moratorium. In the case of internet content, the law does not speak clearly if internet-online campaign is part of moratorium, but most news websites try to observe it. However it definitely does not apply to Web 2.0 (e.g. Facebook posts, candidate websites etc.) and to offline content. This makes online communication one of the most liberal, unregulated and free environments in Slovak politics and thus creates another potential advantage.

3.1 Presidential Elections

Currently, the Slovak presidential elections and campaigning are held in accordance with the Law no. 46/1999. This law mentions some specifics that limit the campaign, which are not mentioned in *Figure 4* are:

- a) campaigning for the presidency before the official time frame is prohibited (however, unofficial campaigning is always taking place as there is no punishment set for breaking this rule)
- b) the public service broadcasters Slovak Television and Radio have to devote equal time for all the candidates, up to 10 hours altogether
- c) the commercial service broadcasters can offer equal time in paid political advertising, up to 10 hours of airtime altogether
- d) in their news reports, all the broadcasters have to be unbiased, what is monitored by the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission (Law no. 46/1999)

It is interesting to note during the 2009 season the import of U.S. campaigning elements. On the side of Ivan Gašparovič it was the negativity of his campaign. Every time there fear is part of the campaign and the campaign is able to brand the competitor in a negative light, the voter will probably reward. It does not have to be true, in many cases it is enough if the negative label holds. Iveta Radičová, the candidate of the parliamentary opposition (SDKÚ, OKS – Civic Conservative Party, SMK – Hungarian Coalition and KDH), never promised autonomy to the Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia, despite that the nationalists made the claim and forced the Hungarian issue into mainstream media. Traumatizing problem of Hungarians in Slovakia suddenly polarized the society again and probably got the edge to the governmental candidate Gašparovič. Another interesting “American” moment was the way Radičová’s campaign has been conducted. It was a carbon-copy of Barack Obama’s concept of 2008. It used his slogan: “Yes, *We Can*” and commercials with celebrities that were very reminiscent of the viral ad of Will.i.am in the U.S. presidential race. Both of the candidates relied on campaign strategists for the elections and both of them tackled it in very effective way. She tried to opt a positive and inspirational Obama style of campaigning where the focus was a change in politics.

In 2009 the Slovak campaigning scene moved closer to the U.S. style political marketing. Major candidates had transparent election teams, especially in Radičová’s case, lead by media, PR and advertising professionals. Her team has been also advised by people from the team of Barack Obama and their campaign was definitely inspired by Obama’s 2008 run. They were advised in online and mobile messaging technologies. Ivan Gašparovič was relying on the help of an advertising agency which was also looking for viable campaign concepts and trends outside the country.

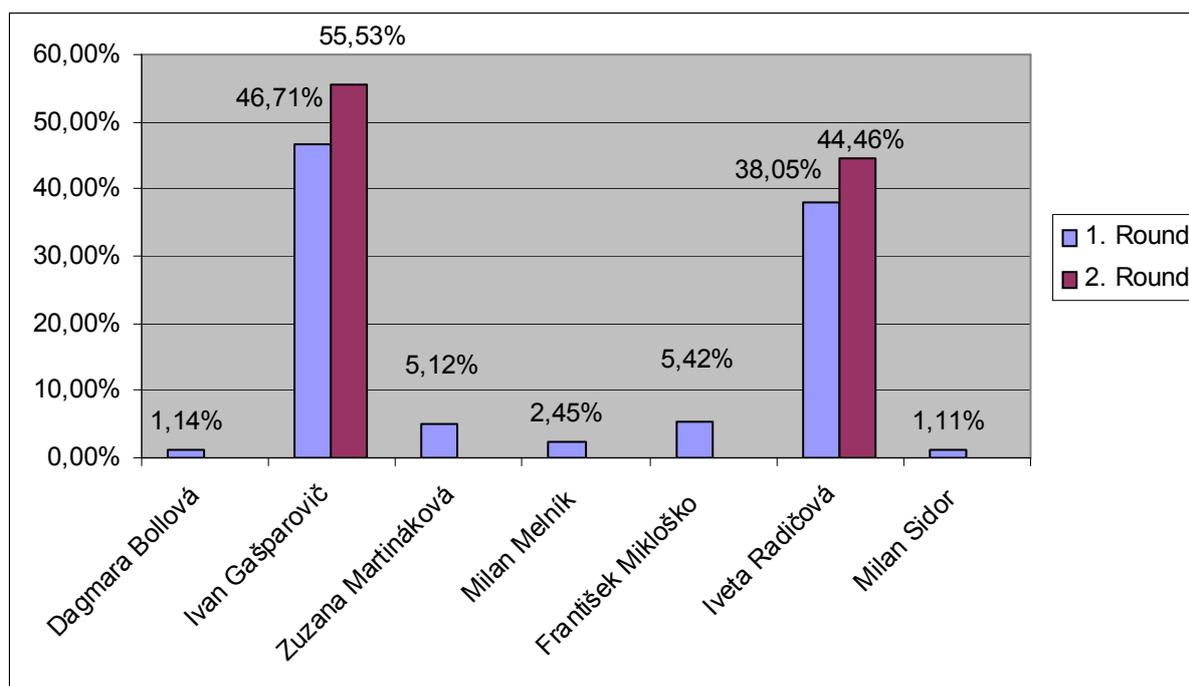
Altogether there were seven candidates in the 2009 race, this was the smallest number as of yet and also noteworthy is the fact that there was not a candidate who reached less than one percent of the vote. Only three candidates did receive less than three percent – independent Dagmara Bollová, communist Milan Sidor and Milan Melník supported by HZDS, two candidates recorded a popularity slightly higher than five percent – liberal Zuzana Martináková and conservative František

Mikloško. The most heated contest was in between the candidate supported by the socialist SMER and nationalist SNS Ivan Gašparovič and Iveta Radičová backed by the parliamentary opposition. Radičová recorded rather strong results in the first round (21 March, 2009), but as both advanced to the second round (4 April, 2009), she ultimately lost by more than 11 percent.

The 2009 election witnessed the most TV debates yet –ten debates altogether, seven of them including the two major candidates and out of those, four were presidential debates. The discussion between four major candidates ahead of the first round of voting on the major TV Markíza was seen by 695-thousand viewers, which was more than the daily average. The debate on TV JOJ was watched by 326-thousand viewers and record-breaker was for the news channel TA3 its first debate with 300-thousand viewers (SME.sk, 2009).

However, during the 2009 election season, there was no major mishap during the presidential debate that could decide the elections or switch a large portion of the potential voters of one candidate towards the other. Notwithstanding, one moment is worth mentioning: when Ivan Gašparovič could not correctly identify what the search engine Google is in the debate on TV Markíza.

Figure 5: 2009 Presidential Election - Final Results



Source: Statistical Office of Slovak Republic

4.3 Internet in the Presidential Campaign

It was for the first time that every relevant online news medium devoted considerable attention to the topic of elections and campaigning in form of extensive online specials. Every relevant medium – print or broadcasting – had a special website, even the tabloid Nový Čas created its online presidential service at prezident.cas.sk. During pre-election time, all of these portals recorded increases in the readership, during election day weekend, the election helped drive the readership up

again (in comparison with average weekend) – most successful were the election projects of SME.sk, Aktuality.sk and Topky.sk, SME offered many interactive tools for the voters – like voting test which would show which candidate has the opinion closest to yours, daily campaign news starting two months ahead of the vote, schedules of all the candidates and election related video (Vozárová, 2009) News portal Aktuálne.sk offered in a special section chat-rooms with the presidential candidates, and the already mentioned Cas.sk offered great interactivity, including a service called Who with Who /Ktoskym.sk which shows the web of intertwined relationships between politicians and other public figures. Critics claimed that the informational service of volby.sme.sk out of the SME news group was the “most imaginative among the internet media” thanks for example to the interactive news graphics (Michlík, 2009). SME.sk offered interactive election test that would pinpoint in percentage how much do you feel and think as the respective candidate.

Some of the candidates had aired their ads on national TV stations – for example Iveta Radičová was with celebrities on news channel TA3 and commercial JOJ, news channel was the place where you could see Zuzana Martináková and Ivan Gašparovič had as well paid TV ad ahead of the second round. Supporters of František Mikloško created audio-visual ad for him too. However that one was spread only via YouTube.

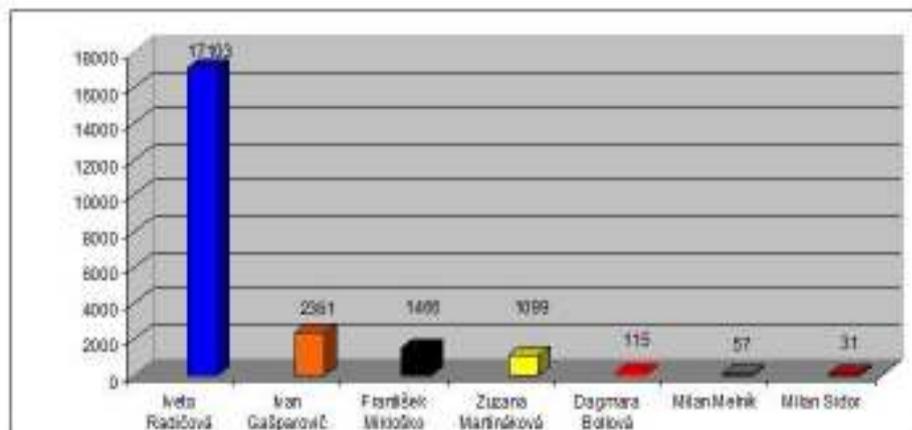
The candidates themselves have discovered that Internet is a useful tool. Iveta Radičová had an advanced website with videos, campaign downloads, updated news, a profile and program. She was definitely a frontrunner in online campaigning, as her main competitors website (Ivan Gašparovič) was showing “under construction” already at the start of early campaigning.

There were many initiatives out in the blogosphere. Especially the supporters of Radičová and Mikloško were blogging in support of their or against other candidates. “This is the first elections that the fight is taking place in the blogosphere,” said Vladimír Palko (**Ondrášik, 2009**). Noteworthy projects were My President – Moja prezidentka (Radičová), I Vote for Fero! – Volím Fera! (Mikloško) or Our President – Náš prezident (Gašparovič). There was also a noticeable negative anti-campaign. Young members of the opposition SDKÚ party deployed a website called Bad President – Zlý prezident against Ivan Gašparovič, against Radičová was the project AntiRadicova.sk. On Facebook the campaign against Gašparovič was much more visible than against Radičová.

Campaign financing restrictions and costly broadcast fees had forced many presidential candidates to put their advertisements online: in form of banners or videos. TV ad had Ivan Gašparovič, Iveta Radičová and Zuzana Martináková. All of these used Slovak internet sites for campaign advertising. Web ad had František Mikloško as well – in his case on YouTube.

And of course Web 2.0 - the social networking site Facebook - was part of the campaign as well. Here was the top candidate Iveta Radičová – as of March 21st, during the first round of election, she had more than 17.000 supporters in various Facebook groups, fan clubs and in the friend-list of her Facebook profile whilst her opponent had just a bit over then two thousands fans and supporters. Altogether more than 22.000 revealed their political affiliation on this community website.

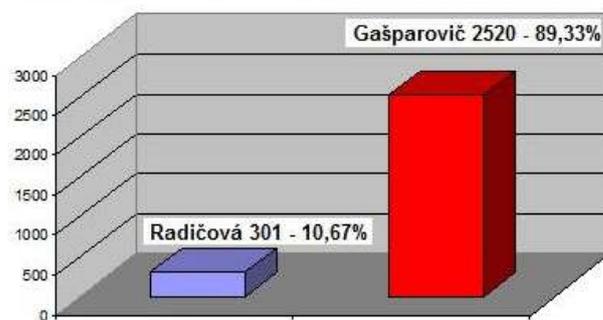
Figure 7: 2009 Elections on Facebook



ONDRÁŠIK, B. 2009. Political Marketing and its Professionalization: Ten Years of Campaigning for Slovak Presidency (1999, 2004 and 2009). Slovenská politologická revue. 9 (3), p. 21

However, Gašparovič was a leading recipient of online negativity – more than two thousand people have joined anti Gašparovič groups, in case of Radičová these numbers were only in hundreds.

Figure 8: 2009 Anticampaign on Facebook



ONDRÁŠIK, B. 2009. Political Marketing and its Professionalization: Ten Years of Campaigning for Slovak Presidency (1999, 2004 and 2009). Slovenská politologická revue. 9 (3), p. 21

3.2 European elections

Elections to the European parliament took place in Slovakia on Saturday, June 6th. They were governed by Law no. 331/2003 – “The European Elections Law”. Slovaks elected 13 members of the European parliament. Altogether 18 political parties were running for MEP seats but only third of those, all members of the national parliament were capable of achieving this goal. At least five percent of the voters have to vote for a party to get in to the parliament with one MEP seat.

Data used in this chapter were obtained through the European wide Comparative European New Media and Elections Project (CENMEP) that is focused on online media use in the 2009 European parliament election campaign. The project is part of COST A30 initiative: East of West:

Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media Research Agenda, Data on multimedia use were acquired through coding of political parties, campaign and candidates websites.

Research participants: Coding of the websites was conducted by Branislav Ondrášik (Bratislava School of Law). Ahead of the coding process successful inter-reliability has been conducted, three months after the coding, intracoder reliability test had been performed. Coordinators of the project is Radboud University of Nijmegen and Groningen University, Netherlands.

Materials/Measures used: Questionnaire was developed by the coordinating universities in the Netherlands. Coding was performed online and other data (snapshots of social networking websites) had been sent via mail. All data of the coded websites have been backed up on the serve of the Radboud University and for Slovakia at the Faculty of Media, Bratislava School of Law.

Collection of data: Data were acquired through the coding process of 58 websites: 26 were candidates campaign websites, 16 were websites if political parties, 17 were profiles on the webpages of political parties and 3 were special campaign websites for the European parliament elections.

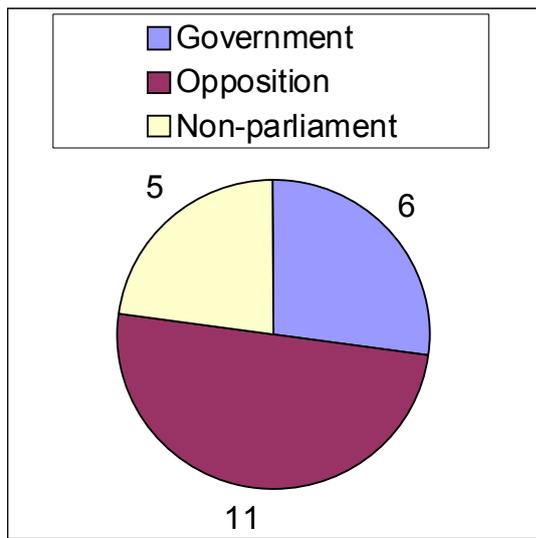
Limitations of the research: To contain the limitations, inter and intracoder reliability tests have been conducted.

Based on the political and ideological indicators, there were altogether 17 websites from the government camp, 19 from the parliamentary opposition and 22 nationally non-parliamentary parties.

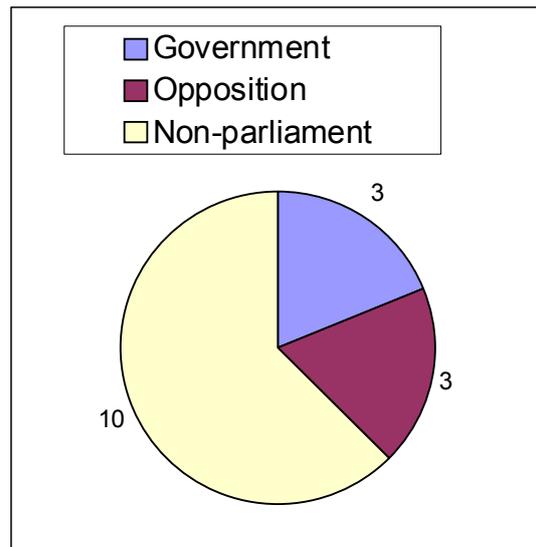
Figure 9: CENMEP websites breakdown for Slovakia

	Frequency	Percent
Website of political party	16	27,6
Campaign website	3	5,2
Candidate´s website	22	37,9
Candidate´s webpage on political party website	17	29,3
Total	58	100,0

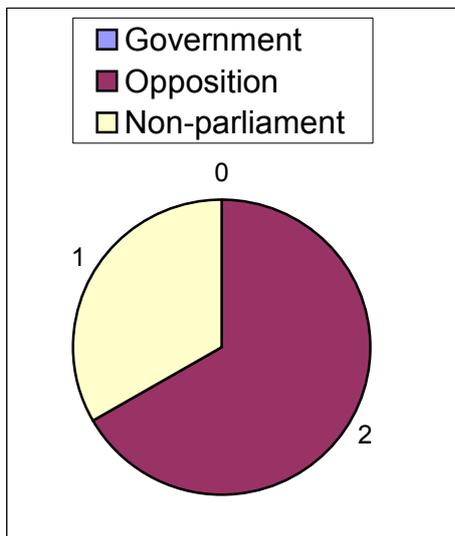
Websites of candidates: political breakdown



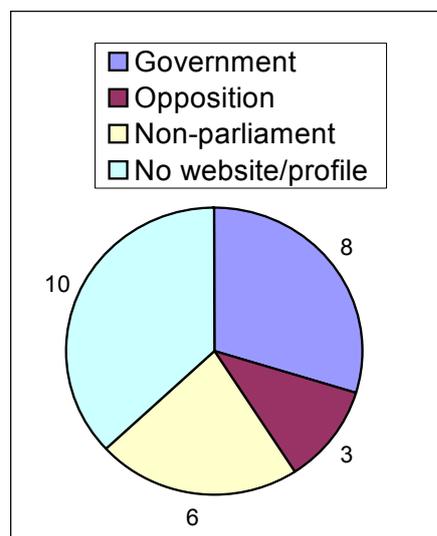
Websites of parties: political breakdown



Campaign websites: political breakdown

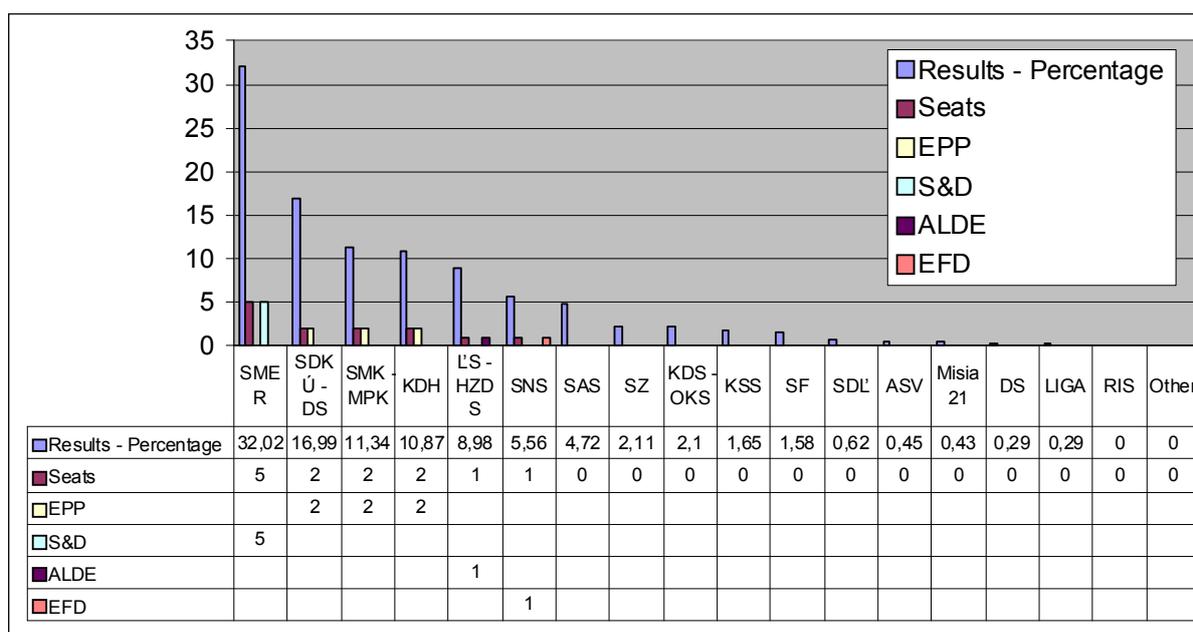


Coded website profiles: political breakdown



When analyzing the breakdown on the use of various web features by government, opposition and non-parliamentary parties, this methodology has been used: selection was made for the three party websites of government (SMER-SD, SNS, ĽS-HZDS), three websites of opposition (SDKÚ-DS-campaign website, SMK-MKP and KDĽH - campaign website) and five most popular non-parliamentary parties (OKS, KSS, Greens, SaS, SF).

Figure 10: Results of the European Elections in Slovakia



Source: European parliament

3.2.1 Use of blogs

Notwithstanding the dramatic increase of internet penetration in Slovakia and number of bloggers, almost two thousand people blogging on Slovakia's most popular blogging portal blog.sme.sk, blogosphere does not seem to be as popular in political communication yet.

Even as in the presidential campaign and elections, part of the fight took place in the blogosphere, blogs of politicians were relatively silent during the EP campaign.

Figure 11: Does the party / candidate's website have a blog?

	Frequency	Percent
yes, on the same website	2	3,4
yes, on another web address / URL	12	20,7
no	44	75,9
Total	58	100,0

Only 14 parties and candidates out of 58 coded websites (24,1) had a blog and only part of those had an active blog during the campaign season. Vas majority of the blogs (86 percent of all the recorded blogs) were placed on another URL, in many cases news websites like blog.sme.sk or the blogging portal of the financial daily Hospodárske noviny. As majority was placed on pre-programmed URL's of different websites, they had automatically allowed interactivity: users could rate the blogposts in 9 cases out of 14 and discuss it in 10 cases.

When the situation on the government/opposition/non-parliamentary had been observed: coalition parties had one blog that could be associated with a party itself, opposition parties had no blog that would reflect the European elections and non-parliamentary had four party blogs present on the five coded or affiliated websites.

3.2.2 Use of multimedia features

When various multimedia features are being scrutinized: Web feeds, Wikis, audio, video, photography and language mutations, the results of the research are mixed at best. For example, not a single website offers wiki-style of approach and this for of user-generated content that could have been a good feedback for the campaign teams as well. From the offered web feeds, the RSS feed is the most popular (part of 22,4 percent of the websites), followed by the only other feed present Atom (in 3,4 percent of cases). This feeds do offer news and press releases in their content. Only in 17,2 percent of the cases (10 websites) were the users allowed to email published articles to a third person.

In comparison, videos were the most popular multimedia content offered by the campaign websites. Videos were present in 53,4 cases. Vast majority of the video's, 28 cases / meaning 90,3 percent are in form of campaign television and audiovisual spots. In 13 cases (41,9 of the video sites), the party or candidate streams public appearances of politicians. Party conferences were shown in 25,8 percent of the sites that offered videos (8 cases). However not a single website or feature would offer video content of home/private situations. Most of the videos were published on a video sharing site (YouTube).

When I looked at the ideological breakdown, most successful in deploying videos were opposition parties – it was present on all three (100 percent) of analyzed websites, two parties of the government offered videos and in case of non parliamentary parties, video was present in 3 out of five cases (60 percent).

Figure 12: Does the website contain video's?

	Frequency	Percent
yes	31	53,4
no	27	46,6
Total	58	100,0

Figure 13: Where are the video's hosted?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
on the web server of the political party	12	20,7	38,7
on a video sharing website	19	32,8	61,3
Total	31	53,4	100,0
no video	27	46,6	
Total	58	100,0	

Almost as popular as videos were photos. Special sections for photographic material (galleries) were present in 46,6 of the coded websites. Here were the politicians more opened than in videos as in 37 percent of the galleries there were pictures of home and private situations, vast majority (25 cases, 92,6 percent) offered pictures of public appearances.

Only in one case, the gallery was hosted on a sharing site (Picassa), overall only 1,7 percent of the websites allowed users to comment on the published pictures and in two cases they could rate them. One third of the government parties's websites offered galleries and two thirds of opposition parties, 60 percent of the non-parliamentary representative websites offered photographic sections.

Figure 13: Does the website contain a photo gallery or a photo album?

	Frequency	Percent
yes, hosted on the same website	27	46,6
yes, hosted on a photo sharing site	1	1,7
no	30	51,7
Total	58	100,0

Some websites did offer short or larger opinion polls, altogether 11 opinion polls have been found on the analyzed websites.

Smaller portion of the websites had offered language switch for their content, 14 cases: 24,1 percent. Mostly present was the English language (85,7 percent of the cases) and four times was recorded German and the language of Slovakia's largest ethnic minority Hungarian (both 28,6 valid percent).

Figure 14: Is there a language switch on the website?

	Frequency	Percent
yes	14	24,1
no	44	75,9
Total	58	100,0

3.2.3 Informational value of the content

The primary goal of online media is to provide informational content. The free internet environment is offering a unique opportunity for the parties and candidate to provide the voter with as much information as possible. However in Slovakia, this potential was not very well used in the run-up to the European elections.

Less than half of the coded websites (48,3) percent had a section called news and even less – 31,0 percent had a section “candidate/party in the media” and only 25,9 percent of the website had a designated press release section. Even less, only 10,3 percent of the coded websites offered a subscription for a newsletter.

The governing coalition parties were a bit more keen to provide more information: two out of three had a news sections, all had a section about media monitoring, all had press release sections and one provided a news letter subscription. All three opposition parties had a news section, one had a party in the media clipping, one had a designated press release section and one offered a newsletter. Non-parliamentary parties were mixed in their informational approach: three out of five had news, one had “in media” clipping, three had press release section and one of the five analyzed had a newsletter subscription.

Figure 15: Information sections and subscriptions

		Frequency	Percent
News section	yes	28	48,3
	no	30	51,7
Candidate/Party in the media section	yes	18	31,0
	no	40	69,0
Press Release section	yes	15	25,9
	no	43	74,1
Newsletter subscription	yes	6	10,3
	no	52	89,6
Total		58	100,0

Where to find information of political meetings and campaign events if not online? However a list of upcoming events was present, again, in less than 50 percent of the websites: 43,1 percent (22 cases) to be precise. In one users could add and register for events, in one case they can subscribe for reminders. Four websites (7,4 percent) offered their users to register for their website, however this tool was not very efficient as in any of those cases a registration would not provided added value a different access. No one provided exclusive access for party members.

What was rather surprising was that not too many parties/candidates had a special section on standpoints on the issues – only 19 cases (32,8 percent) had a designated standpoint section. Party history was addressed only in four cases, section on party or candidates achievements in one case.

Figure 16: Is there a section with the party’s standpoints on issues?

	Frequency	Percent
yes	19	32,8
no	39	67,2
Total	58	100,0

Websites were not very informational with regards to civic education either, only two informed on the electoral procedure, one on how to register to vote. Situation was better in the field of education on European Union politics, however here were not the numbers very impressive either and one might wonder if it could have anything to do with Slovakia having the lowest voter participation out of the

whole EU. Only 15,5 percent of the websites offered these information. From the analyzed 11 party websites, only two opposition parliamentary parties offered this news service.

Figure 17: Section on the civic education on European politics (European Union)

	Frequency	Percent
yes	9	15,5
no	49	84,5
Total	58	100,0

3.2.4 Marketing used for the campaign and party

One of the biggest lacks of political communication of parties and candidates ahead of the European elections (and probably in the Slovak politics in general) is the use of the website for promotional materials, information on how to donate etc.

Only 19 percent of the websites offered pdf documents for users and only 12,1 percent promotional materials like banners, downloads and pictures. Only one website offered information on how to donate (striking 1,7 percent out of the file). But a single party or candidate had an online shop where you could buy campaign material like T-shirts, posters, books, stickers or buttons.

Figure 18: Marketing

		Frequency	Percent
PDF Documents	Yes	11	19,0
	No	47	81,0
Promotional material, such as banners, logo's, pictures	Yes	7	12,1
	No	51	87,9
Total		58	100,0

Some websites offered the opportunity to become party members: 14, which would put most party websites into this category, however only two parties were actively seeking volunteers online. As the party breakdown is being analyzed, not a single one from the large parties offered registration for volunteers.

Figure 19: Party membership and volunteerism

		Frequency	Percent
Can become party member using the website?	yes	14	24,1
	no	44	75,9
Can register as party volunteer?	yes	2	3,4
	no	56	96,6
Total		58	100,0

3.2.5 Details about the candidates

Work has to be done by the parties and candidates in their communication with their voters as well. Only 5 percent provide personal (or personally appearing) email and only 3,4 percent use new technologies like Skype. However, there is way on how to contact the political entities: 70,7 percent list general email, 65,5 percent postal address, 55,2 percent landline phone number, official mobile phone is available in 19 percent of the cases and email form in 13,8 percent. Only two websites offered online forum for their readers and there was not a single “chat room” present.

Figure 20: How can the party or candidate be contacted?

		Frequency	Percent
Personal email	yes	3	5,2
	no	55	94,8
Personal mobile phone	yes	1	1,7
	no	57	98,3
General email	yes	41	70,7
	no	17	29,3
Email form	yes	8	13,8
	no	50	86,2
Postal address	yes	38	65,5
	no	20	34,5
Phone-landline	yes	32	55,2
	no	26	44,8
Party mobile	yes	11	19,0
	no	47	81,0
Skype	yes	2	3,4
	no	56	96,6
Total		58	100,0

The candidates and parties should be as well more open to the public with regards to their official achievements and privacy as well. Vast majority publishes official position, offers insights on his/hers education, some release data on their birth, residence, marital status and children. However only handful publicizes free time activities like music, TV, many being most open with regards to sports (13 candidates). Two areas are still stigmatized on being released: only two politicians openly talked about their religion (it is no surprise that both were part of Christian Democratic Movement) and only one openly admitting lesbian orientation. The Green party candidate was actually the first openly gay candidate in Slovak politics.

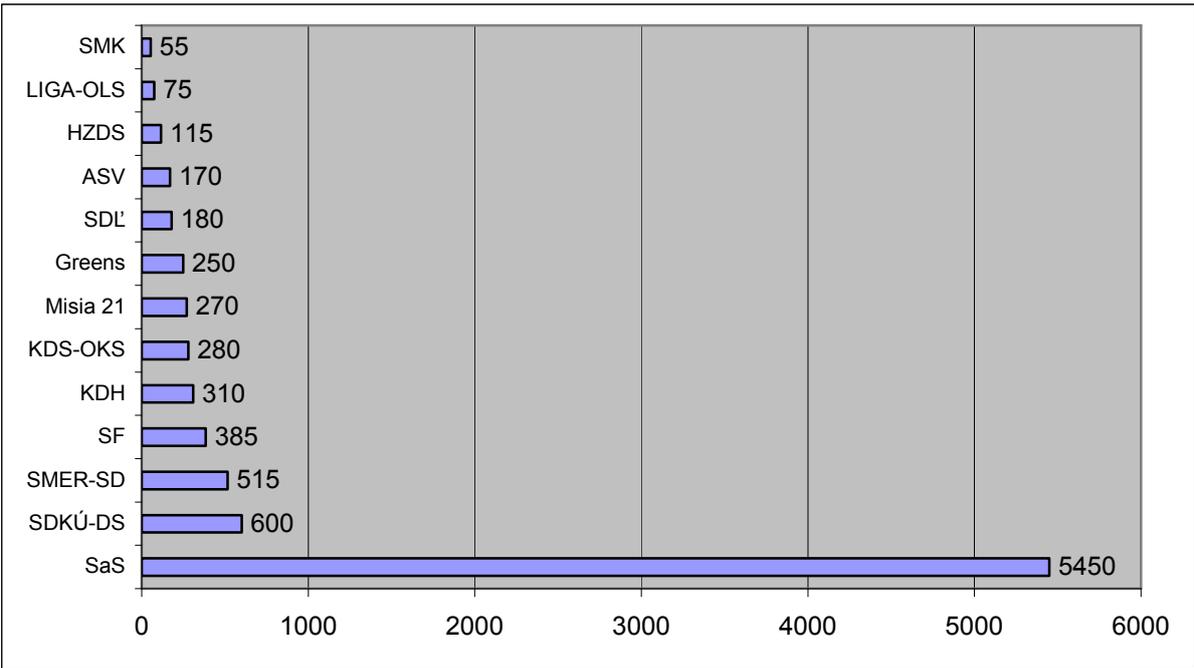
Figure 21: What do the politicians list about themselves?

		Frequency	Percent
Official positions	yes	39	67,2
	no	19	32,8
Education	yes	35	60,3
	no	23	39,7
Description of Political Career	yes	24	41,4
	no	34	58,6
Political achievements	yes	4	6,9
	no	54	93,1
Favourite sports	yes	13	22,4
	no	45	77,6
Favourite music	yes	6	10,3
	no	52	89,7
Favourite TV program	yes	1	1,7
	no	57	98,3
Place of birth	yes	19	32,8
	no	39	67,2
Place of residence	yes	20	34,5
	no	38	65,5
Marital status	yes	16	27,6
	no	42	72,4
Children	yes	12	20,7
	no	46	79,3
Religion	yes	2	3,4
	no	56	96,6
Sexual orientation	yes	1	1,7
	no	57	98,3
	Total	58	100,0

3.2.6 Web 2.0 - Use of Social Networking (Facebook and YouTube)

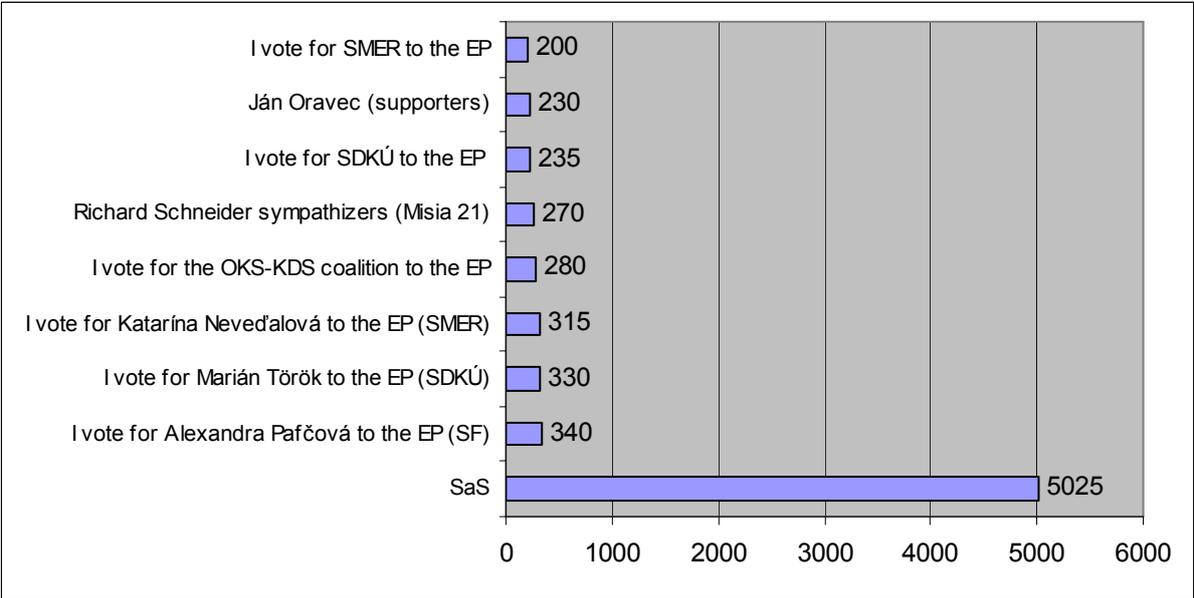
As was already shown on the examples of presidential elections in Slovakia, Web 2.0 is increasing in its popularity, however was not as widely used as during the presidential elections: as the following numbers show. More on the effects of Web 2.0 use will be in the discussion part of this chapter. However we can conclude that most active on the social networks is the non-parliament Freedom and Solidarity party, both on Facebook and YouTube. It has by far the most impressive number of followers. Followed by opposition party SDKÚ-DS and main government party SMER-SD.

Figure 22: Most popular parties on Facebook (number of supporters)



Note: numbers at the end of the European elections campaign, Source: Research by B. Ondrášik

Figure 23: Most popular campaign/party and candidate related groups on Facebook (number of supporters)

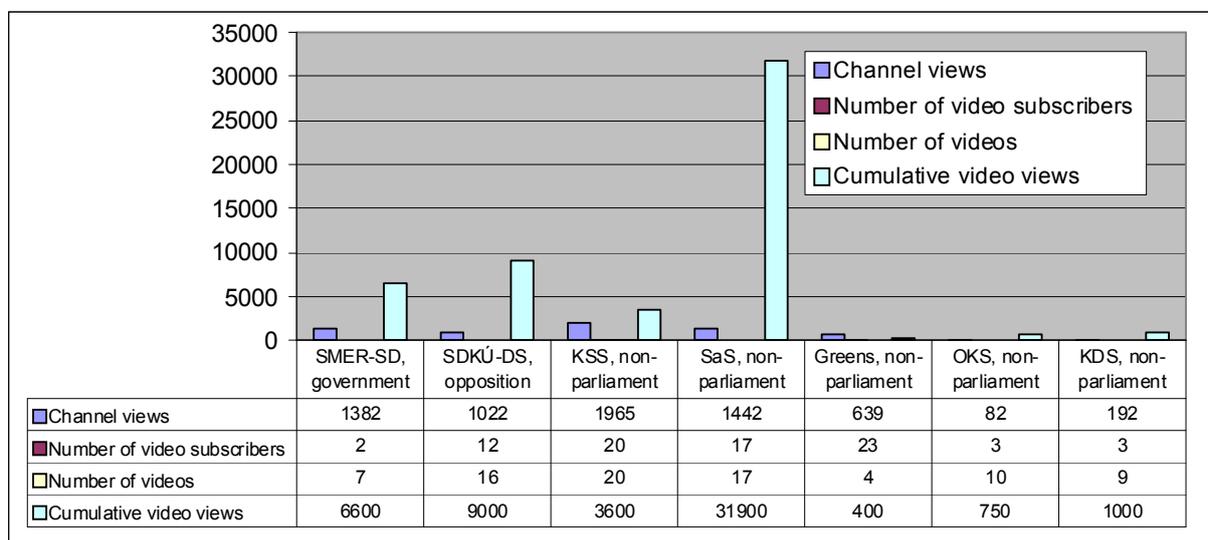


Note: numbers at the end of the European elections campaign, Source: Research by B. Ondrášik

As the figures for YouTube show that many parties find it problematic to attract viewers to their established channels, especially the non-parliament parties (with a notable exception of SaS). Both in the parliamentary and non-parliamentary videos that might have to do with their quality (whether it is

only speech or commercial spot) and whether they are being linked either from party or different websites.

Figure 24: YouTube and the European elections-related videos



Note: numbers at the end of the European elections campaign, Source: Research by B. Ondrášik

And the same is the case for Facebook, even as some politicians already have Facebook pages and there were campaign related groups, the parties and candidates failed to link them from their respective official websites. Only in four cases (6,9 percent) could the items be promoted on social networks, only 9 websites (15,5 percent) had links to social networks (Facebook only), only in one case a social network bookmark could be used and 16 parties/candidates had a channel on YouTube.

Figure 25: Social networks in the European elections campaign

		Frequency	Percent
Can items be promoted on social networks?	yes	4	6,9
	no	54	93,1
Does the website link to social network?	yes	9	15,5
	no	49	84,5
Can visitors use social network bookmarks?	yes	1	1,7
	no	57	98,3
Channel on video sharing social network?	yes	16	27,6
	no	42	72,4
Total		58	100,0

3.2.7 Discussion

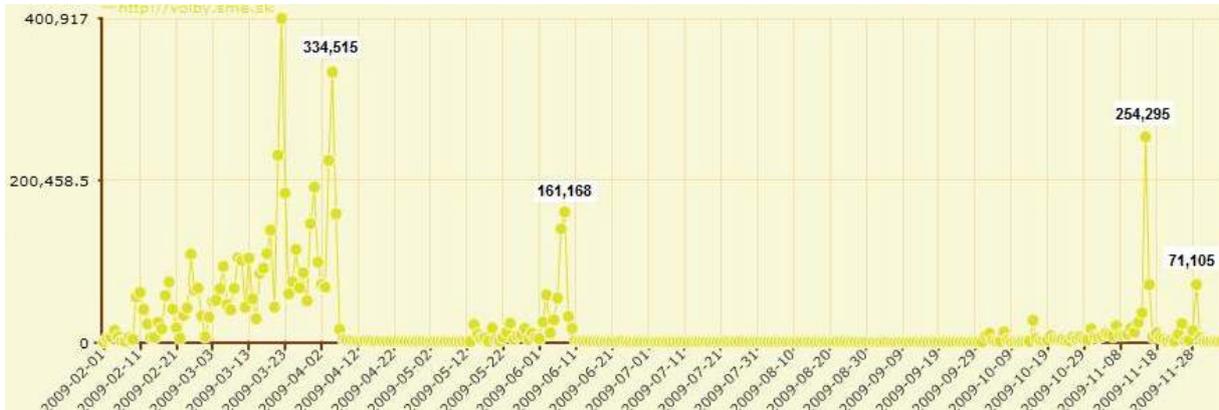
In the previous paragraph a description of the online and Web 2.0 media use in Slovak European elections campaign has been presented. The data provide some clues for the future on the Web and Web 2.0 clues.

Slovakia, again as in 2004, had the lowest voter turnout out of the whole union: 19,6 percent. However according to at least one research survey, the small increase in turnout by 2,7 percent since 2004, could be attributed to the young vote. According to the survey 3,91 percent of young voters between the age 18 to 23 turned out to vote. That would mean that more than half of this voting group did vote in the election booth. Another Eurobarometer research confirms that especially university students 20-24 years were keen to vote (Macháček, 2009: 84). There is not much academic proof that online campaigns can create a mobilization effect. However several surveys conclude that internet campaigns can contribute to electoral civic engagement. However as Perry and Park (2008) stress, campaign web sites tend to focus more on mobilizing party members and supporters who are already engaged rather than on engaging the general public. Ward, Gibson and Lusoli say that internet's mobilizing potential is more myth than reality and defend a so-called "normalization thesis" claiming the Internet will not mean changes in electoral socio-political order.

There are strong indicators though that both in presidential and European elections, social networks could play an important role in mobilizing voters, not to mention that this was certainly in the case of hardcore supporters. As a case example we can use the new party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) that after just a short history could find a place on Slovak political map and missed the European parliament by just 0.28 percent. The data from YouTube and Facebook show that it is by far the most popular party online and this effect might have mirrored in its standing. Poor voter turnout did probably as well contribute to the success of this small party, because its electorate is younger and, as the survey showed, younger voters did turn out in larger numbers.

The small turnout, however, does not have to mean that people were totally disinterested in the European elections, It might have shown dissatisfaction with the political environment as a whole. More than 161-thousand people tuned in to online election news portal volby.sme.sk to watch the results, approximately 334-thousand people went online to see the second round of presidential elections outcome where the turnout has been almost 52 percent (EP elections turnout has been less than 20 percent). That would mean, when comparing with the presidential race, that twice the people tuned to the presidential elections news while the turnout has been almost 2,5-3 times higher. Other possible explanation would be that people voting in European elections are more interested in online news and online media in general.

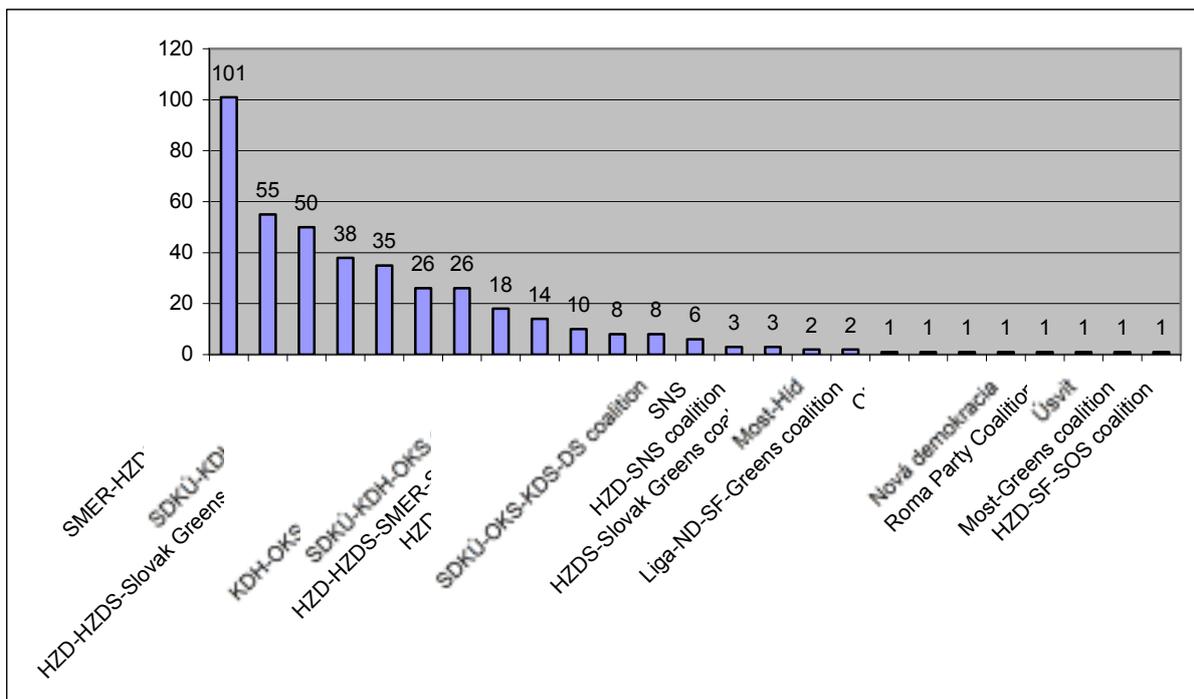
Figure 26: Election coverage peaks of volby.sme.sk (number of readers during election day/aftermath)



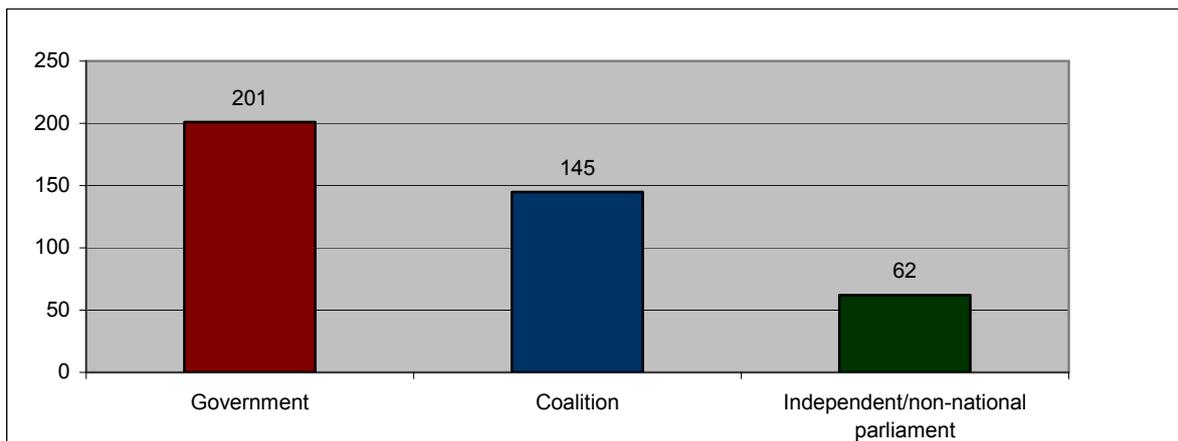
3.3 2009 Regional Elections

In November 2009 two rounds of regional elections took place in Slovakia, in the first round voters selected regional parliament members and regional leaders. In the second round they have for the leaders of those four regions were any candidate did not receive more than 50 percent of the vote. Because these elections are regionally centered, this analysis will be primarily focused on the elections in the Bratislava region where the top candidates were: Pavol Frešo (right-wing opposition), Vladimír Baján (independent with the support of governing coalition), Branislav Zahradník (Civic Candidates party) and former news anchor and reporter Robo Beňo (Most-Híd).

Figure 27: Regional election results – Number of seats in regional parliaments

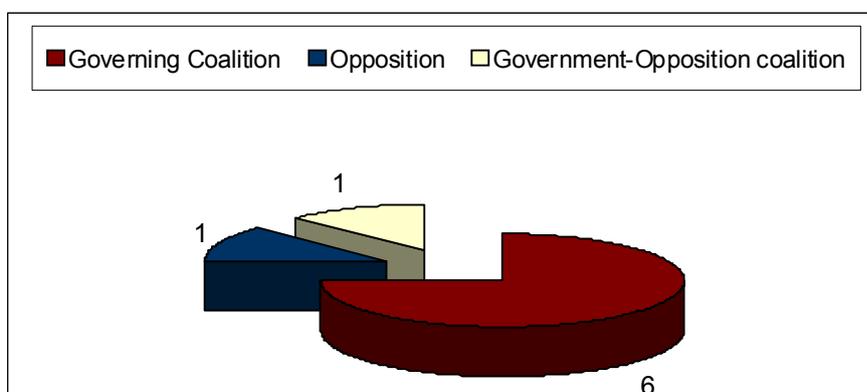


Source: Statistical Office of Slovak Republic, B. Ondrášik



Source: Statistical Office of Slovak Republic, B. Ondrášik

Results of the elections of regional leaders



Source: Statistical Office of Slovak Republic, B. Ondrášik

This campaign had several distinctive features and reasserted some already mentioned trends. This campaign was filled with negative campaigning in all of the regions. As it was during presidential elections, the issue of Hungarian minority was misused in some cases, in other it was personal life of candidates and sex. In Bratislava, Vladimír Bajan was subjected to vicious online campaigning with a website that has portrayed him with a cartoon about a lazy drone. In other instance, Pavol Frešo was accused that he misuses children for serving alcohol on his campaign events.

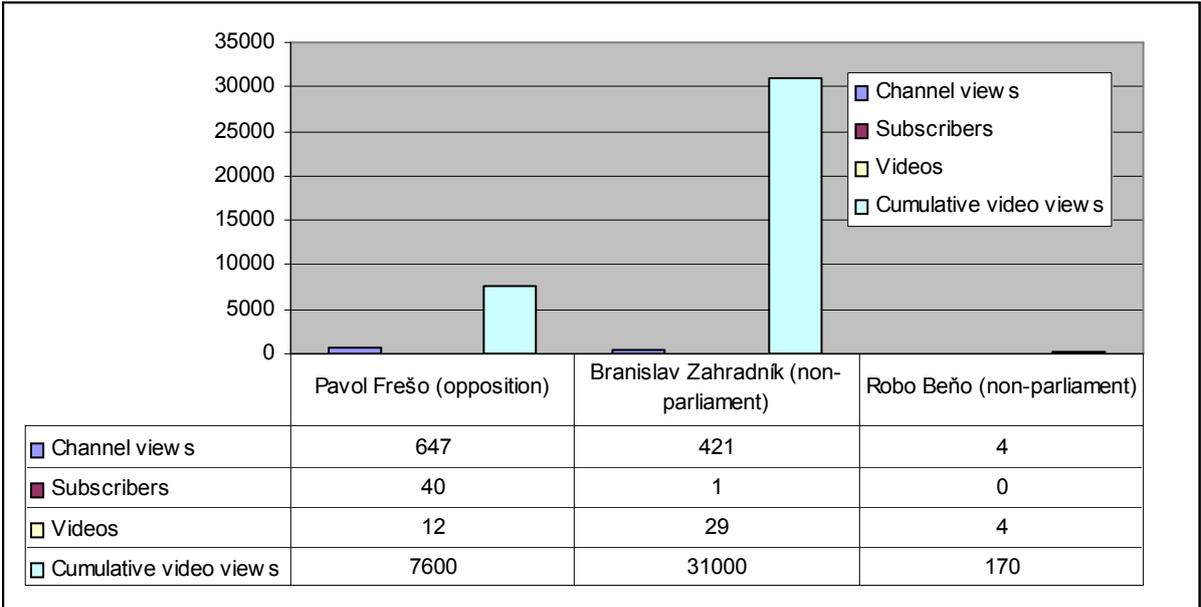
The trend of low voter turnout continued, in the first round of the vote, just 22,9 percent of people turned out to vote. However this was more than expected. In Bratislava, the candidates used hundreds of euros for the campaign, mostly invested in outdoor advertising.

Many candidates used Web 2.0 and online campaigning, however just a few of them could really attract attention. One of those was Branislav Zahradník, a Slovak television personality, currently head of the public transport company in Bratislava. His campaign has used predominantly YouTube to upload its videos, including a campaign with a Slovak hip-hop artist Rytmus.

Branislav Zahradnik did attract 14,88 percent of the vote in Bratislava, thus making him the most successful candidate without a backing of parliamentary party. As *Figure 28* shows, cumulative

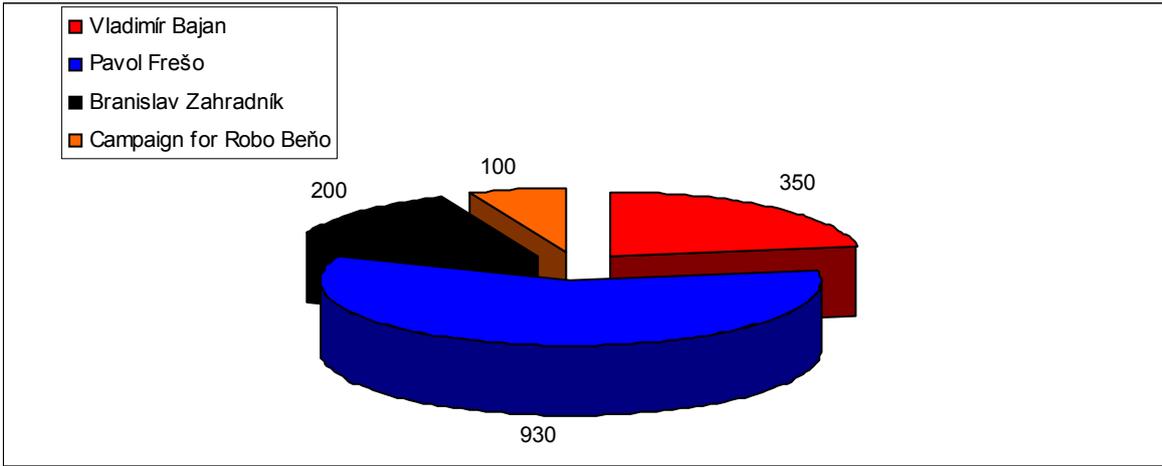
video views of his YouTube channel were more than four times higher than was the winner of the elections Pavol Frešo who is a national MP and had backing of three major opposition parties in the parliament. Vladimír Bajan skipped Web 2.0 campaign altogether. However Pavol Frešo was the strongest candidate on Facebook, where he had 900 followers and friends (includes his personal profile and supporting groups), Zahradník kept only his Facebook profile, Vladimír Bajan was networking with 350 friends and supporters. In comparison with Barack Obama this is definitely a low number but will certainly be higher coming parliamentary elections in June.

Figure 28: YouTube use in the 2009 Bratislava regional elections



Source: Research by B. Ondrášik

Figure 29: Bratislava regional candidates on Facebook (number of friends and supporters)



Source: Research by B. Ondrášik

Conclusions

This paper offered a first look into the use of online campaigning in Slovakia. It was for the first time that Web 2.0 has been deployed for campaigning. It was for the first time that the blogosphere played a major role. As the paper presented, it was the first time Internet became a valid campaign medium.

In the presidential race it was especially the blogosphere that was very visible, which was noted by chairmen of the campaigns. And as data showed, opposition candidate Iveta Radičová was very forceful in getting support on social networks like Facebook. Even as she lost the second round, her better-than-expected showing is a proof that internet probably played some role as the paid campaign is legally constrained. Law no. 46/1999 on Presidential Election which puts unnecessary limits on the campaign finances amount rather than requiring effective transparency. Community portals like Facebook or video sharing site YouTube were for the first time deployed in the campaign environment during the 2009 presidential elections.

Data used in this chapter were obtained through the European wide Comparative European New Media and Elections Project (CENMEP) that is focused on online media use in the 2009 European parliament election campaign.

Generally speaking, this can be concluded about online media use in the EP elections:

- a) **Blogosphere:** use of blogs in the campaign was limited, only 14 parties and candidates had blogs. Even parties and politicians that had blogs did not use it often enough during EP campaign. Especially parliamentary opposition parties should improve their standing in the blogosphere as not a single party of them had a blog.
- b) **Use of multimedia and user-generated content:** some are totally absent from the Slovak environment, for example wikis. Most widely used were used videos – in 53,4 cases and about half of the websites had photo galleries as well. Here opposition parties were leading in their use of multimedia features, governmental coalition parties (except the leading SMER-SD) were laggards.
- c) **Informational value:** Much more has to be done in spreading information, both about the parties, candidates, their political programs and European politics itself. Less than half of the websites had a news section, less than a third had a clipping “in the media,” about a quarter offered sections on press releases and only one tenth had a newsletter. Only 32,8 percent of the sites offered standpoints on issues, which virtually puts them “off message.” Less than a fifth of websites offered materials about the EU politics.
- d) **No marketing:** Especially marketing lacks in online political communication, there were only few cases of pdf promotional material and even less of graphic banners and downloads. Unlike in the U.S. and the Obama campaign, ahead of the European elections, there was virtually no opportunity to volunteer for a party/candidate.
- e) **Less interactivity:** Many features (video, photo, multimedia) were pretty much static and did not allow to comment or rate the content. Thus valuable feedback is being missed. Especially interactive tools like chat-rooms and wikis were missing, and there were only two cases of online forums.

f) **Social network helps:** As was the case of the SaS party, it shows Facebook and YouTube can be a very low-cost, almost free tool, and can help the campaign. This rather minor party did deploy the largest Web 2.0 campaign and almost acquired the five percent needed for the European parliament entry.

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About the Author

Branislav Ondrášik is currently deputy Director of the Institute of Mass Media Communication at the Faculty of Media of the Bratislava School of Law – Slovakia's largest private university and advisor to the dean of the faculty. He graduated in journalism at the Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University in Bratislava (Mgr. degree, 2003). He continued in Ph.D. studies at the Comenius University and pursued dissertation research in political economy of media as a Fulbright scholar at the Quello Center of Telecommunication Management and Law, College of Communication Arts and Sciences at Michigan State University (2006-2007). He was awarded Ph.D. in theory and history of journalism in 2007. In 2008, studying as a Chevening scholar, he finished M.A. studies with Distinction in political communication at the Institute of Communication Studies; Faculty of Performance, Visual Arts and Communications, University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. His research interest is mainly in the field of media political economy and his Ph.D. dissertation topic was about the globalization, regulation and concentration of media ownership in the Central European region. He published and lectured both domestically and internationally. Along his academic career, Branislav Ondrášik has worked since 1999 as a professional journalist. He specifically focuses on U.S. and Slovak politics and campaigning. Between 2000-2005 he worked at the international desk of the leading financial daily *Hospodárske noviny*, he wrote about media for the Czech trade magazine *Strategie* and was member of the founding team of the first Sunday newspaper in Slovakia – *Nový Čas Nedeľa*. Since 2006 he works at the leading mainstream daily *SME* and its online offshoot *SME.sk*. He is the chief editor of the online election project *volby.sme.sk*.