

Social media in the presidential election campaign: Slovakia 2019

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Abstract: *Since its origin, social media have been perceived as a place of self-expression and freedom of opinion. Social media, especially Facebook, are considered a powerful tool for various public administration activities that do not relate only to informing citizens, but also having them participate in decision-making and municipality governance. Nowadays, social media are also used in the marketing of a person or political party. This paper deals with the position and tasks of social media in the 2019 presidential election campaign in Slovakia. The article is based on an analysis of the Facebook pages and profiles of all 15 candidates for the post of President of the Slovak Republic. The research was carried out in the months of September 2018 – March 2019 using a special tool for analyzing Facebook pages called Facepager. We analysed number and type of posts and interactions (i.e. number of likes and shares) for the candidates by calculating so called interaction rate. Using basic statistical methods, we have confirmed the relevance and importance of using social media in the presidential election campaign. The paper also suggests some steps for better election campaigns – municipal, regional, national or even European Union election campaigns, showing the big potential of social media in political marketing.*

Keywords: social networks, social media, presidential election campaign, Slovakia

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Introduction

Boyd and Ellison (2007) call, for example, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and Instagram social networks. The ability to publish information is not a key function of the social networks, but is the basis for social media. Social media are

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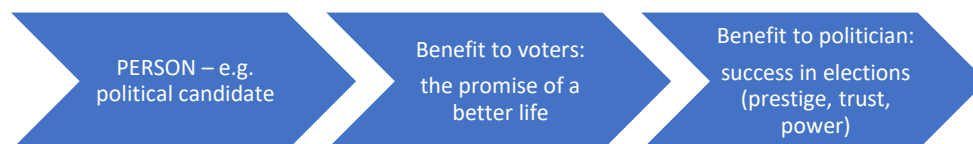
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used to publish reports on events and problems that have happened, therefore they also exchange personal and professional information and have the ability to disseminate information in general. It is very important to distinguish between social networks and social media. Scott claims that "social media allow people to exchange ideas and opinions, to collect content on the site, and to make contacts online. Social media differ from mainstream in that everyone can create their content, as well as contribute or comment on it. Social media can take the form of text, audio, video or photography, and other image forms that connect communities, and meet the needs of people who want to associate." (Scott, 2009, p. 38). We can therefore claim in accordance with the authors that social media are a broader concept: Social Media = Social Networks (to keep in touch with family, friends) + Publishing (news).

Social media include a wide online range of word-of-mouth, including blogs, sponsored discussion forums or service rating websites, Internet discussion forums and moblogs (digital audio, image, video or chart pages), and social networking websites. Social media have two basic tasks. The first role of social media is to help companies communicate with customers through blogs, Facebook or Myspace, and so on. These social media can be corporate, sponsored by organisations or private individuals. The second task is to communicate between customers. (Mangold, Faulds, 2009) In the case of elections, it concerns communication between politicians and voters. Political marketing is a combination of marketing and communication theories, political competition and technological advancements that affect everyday people every day, whether on the way to work or in the comfort of one's home (Scamell, 1999).

The aim of political marketing is to succeed in the elections. Political marketing is part of the marketing of people. Zhang and Daugherty (2009) define marketing of people as activities that are aimed at creating, maintaining or changing attitudes or behaviour towards certain people. The goal of marketing of people is to create a celebrity - a famous, well-known personality, whose name arouses attention and interest and provokes certain behaviour and actions. However, marketing of people can also be marketing of a politician or candidate, as shown in figure 1:

Figure 1. Marketing of people as part of political marketing



(Source: Authors, 2019)

Politicians were the first to react to these changes brought about by social media by using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs to rally support. (Mickoleit, 2014). The importance of social media use is beyond doubt, yet only

little attention is paid to the use of social media in election campaigns, especially in the countries of Central and East Europe (CEE), like Slovakia, where the use of the Internet and social media is still only on the rise. According to Eurostat data, the percentage of individuals between the ages of 16 and 74 using Internet for social media participation in the Slovak Republic rises annually. In 2014, it was 50%, the following year the share rose to 54% and in 2016 57% of the population between 16 and 74 used the Internet to participate in social media (Eurostat 2017).

Therefore, we chose to analyse an election campaigning Slovakia and the ways in which candidates interacted with citizens by using social media. To fulfil this intention, the objective was set to analyse social media use in the Slovak presidential election campaign in 2019 as the latest one. We employ methods of manual data collection from Facebook pages of the candidates, a Facepager analysis and basic statistical methods.

1. Literature overview

Nowadays, social media are also used to make contact with citizens. Citizens have the opportunity to express their views 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Public administration portals mainly use Facebook to involve citizens in activities in local government (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2018). Politicians, in turn, use social networks for their election campaigns to inform the general public about the election manifesto. Bryer and Zavattaro (2014) describe social media as a tool for increasing government transparency, public participation and intergovernmental and cross-sectoral cooperation.

The use of social media in election campaigns in developed countries has been analysed by several authors in their research. Social networks have become very popular, especially among adolescents and young adults. Consequently, politicians started to use them for their campaigns. Utz (2009) examined how this personalised soft campaigning strategy worked in the 2006 Dutch elections and how interaction with potential voters could influence the evaluation of the candidates. Using the methods of web survey and a web experiment on a fictive candidate she proved that social media provide an opportunity to reach individuals less interested in politics. Viewing a candidate's profile further strengthened existing attitudes. However, the politicians did not fully use the interactive features of social media during the 2006 campaign. The web experiment showed that politicians who react to the comments of users were perceived more favourably. This effect was stronger for right-wing politicians and left-wing voters.

Karlsen in 2009 analysed social media and the parliamentary candidates in the 2009 Norwegian election campaign. His research argues that the effect of new technology depends on the contextual characteristics of the campaign, most importantly the nomination process and the electoral system. Findings reveal that online social media are much appreciated by candidates and are used to a great extent. The technological effect on individual campaigning appears small as

candidates who consider social media important do not focus on their own candidacy to a greater extent than the other candidates. However, candidates with an individualised candidate focus are more inclined to use Facebook and consider social media important for their campaign communication. Consequently, although social media in the short run are not likely to increase individualised campaigning as such, candidates with a candidate focus have been offered a new channel for self-promotion.

Social media monitoring in politics can be understood by situating it in the theories of public opinion. The multimethod study presented by Anstead and O'Loughlin indicates how social media monitoring allows for analysis of social dynamics through which opinions form and shift. Analysis of media coverage from the 2010 UK general election demonstrates that social media are being equated with public opinion by political journalists (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2015).

Analysis of Twitter users in the 2010 Swedish election campaign identified different user types based on how high-end users utilised the Twitter service, raising voices claiming that the Internet, and particularly social media applications like Twitter, provides interesting opportunities for online campaigning and deliberation (Larsson and Moe, 2011). A study by Vergeer, Hermans and Sams (2011) on Twitter also focused on investigating how candidates running for the European Parliament (EP) in 2009 used micro-blogging and online social networks in the early stage of its adoption – to communicate and connect with citizens. Candidates from progressive parties were the most active users of Twitter as a campaigning tool, whereas conservatives were virtually absent online.

Cameron et al. (2015) analysed data from the 2011 New Zealand general election and the size of the candidates' social media networks on Facebook and Twitter. Their research focused on whether social media is associated with election votes and probability of election success. Overall, the results suggest that there is a statistically significant relationship between the size of online social networks and election voting and election results. However, the size of the effect is small and it appears that social media presence is therefore only predictive in closely contested elections.

Hong and Nadler (2012) studied the potential impact of social media on the 2012 U.S. presidential elections, by testing the association between “candidate salience” and the candidates' level of engagement in the online social media sphere, especially Twitter. They discovered that while social media does substantially expand the possible modes and methods of election campaigning, high levels of social media activity on the part of presidential candidates have, as of yet, resulted in minimal effects on the amount of public attention they receive online.

The use of social media by the government in post-communist countries is still in its infancy, but there is still some research, but little is aimed at the use of social media in the election campaign. Use of social media in election

campaigns in CEE countries was researched by Piechota (2011) who analysed the use of social media in the political communication of local leaders in the election processes on the example of Facebook's use by mayors of voivodship cities in Poland in the 2010 election campaign. Communication by the mayors of the voivodship cities who use Facebook is carried out quite irregularly, intensifying during the election processes. The mayors are not interested in participation in discussions held after publication of information by them, which is evidenced that Facebook activity is not treated as an attempt to build a platform for public debate.

In the Czech Republic, Štětka and Mazák (2014) examined the relationship between online political expression and offline forms of political participation in the context of the 2013 Czech parliamentary elections. Their study uses data from a cross-sectional survey on a representative sample of the Czech adult population (N=1,653) which was conducted directly following the 2013 parliamentary elections. The results obtained from an ordinal logistic regression analysis confirm the existence of a significant positive relationship between the respondents' level of campaign engagement on Facebook and their political interest as well as traditional (mainly offline) participation activities, including voting.

The presidential race of 2009 in Romania was researched by Aparaschivei (2011) and Holotescu et al (2011) from various perspectives. Aparaschivei based his research on the premise that the Romanian presidential candidates have included social media in their communicational strategy only as a mechanical reaction to the rapid development of these networks. Holotescu et al. focused more on microblogging – especially through the Twitter platform. In both studies, social media was not used fully, the authors believe that if microblogging and other types of social media are used effectively, they have the potential to do more than facilitate interaction between users and candidates. Tănase (2015) built up on these studies stating that in the 2014 presidential election that the main purpose of online campaign is to empower fans to interact with the posts of the candidate. Thus, any kind of feedback – like, comment or share – decentralises the political message in social groups of fans where it has a greater influence than the political actor. Once the message is discussed in social groups, strong ties (friends) of the fans are persuaded to become, in their turn, fans of the political actor and the conversion rate increase and this process will continue as long as interaction rate is high.

However, for Slovakia, no research of this issue was conducted, Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2012) only mentioned the political parties in the 2010 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, which made effective use of social media, especially blogs and Facebook, and raised the profiles by campaigning for referenda on popular proposals such as reducing the number of parliamentarians and limiting the amount of money spent on government limousines. This lack of research on the use of social media in this election campaign was the motivation for this paper.

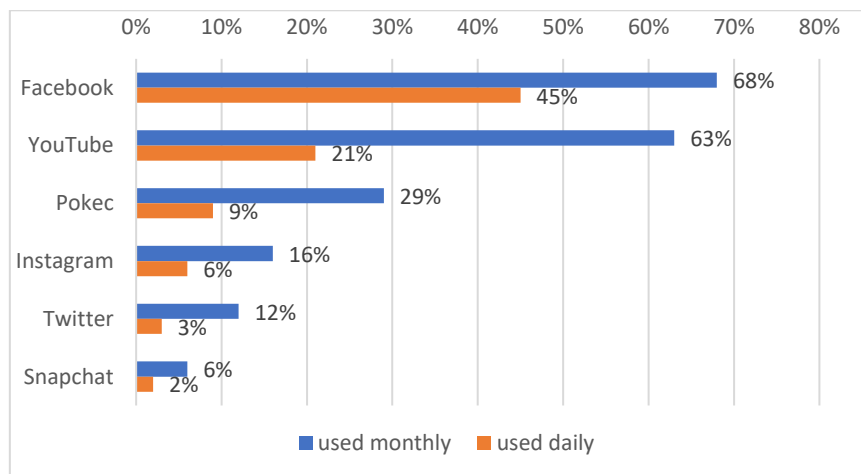
2. Research methodology

The objective of this paper is to analyse the use of social media in the Slovak presidential election campaign in 2019. Based on the use of social media in Slovakia (figure 2) we focused on Facebook from all of the social media.

We used Facepager to analyse the Facebook pages of presidential candidates to obtain primary resources that were further processed using correlation analysis in SPSS. We have identified five research questions about the election campaign that we tracked with Facepager which were carried out on Facebook:

1. What is the relationship between the number of posts and the number of shares?
2. What is the relationship between the number of comments and the results of the pre-election survey in the first round?
3. What is the relationship between the number of comments and the results of the first round?
4. What is the relationship between the number of posts and the results of the pre-election survey in the second round?
5. What is the relationship between the number of posts and the results of the second round?

Figure 2. Use of social networks in Slovakia



(Source: GfK, 2017)

Using Facepager, we can also analyse the interaction rate as defined by Kmieckowiak (2016) as an indicator that compares the interaction of a given social media profile with the number of followers. The result is a combined index of the sum of likes, shares and comments per own post, standardised by the total number of own posts and followers. This metric, however, has to be used with

some caution. As the sum of interactions divided by the number of own posts is again multiplied by the ratio of followers, a rising number of people following the profile can drag the rate down. This happens when the absolute number of interactions does not rise proportionally to the follower count.

The Interaction rate (IR) can be calculated using the following formula:

$$IR = \frac{\# \text{ of comments} + \# \text{ of likes} + \# \text{ of shares}}{\# \text{ of own posts}} \times \frac{100\%}{\# \text{ of fans}} [1]$$

3. Main findings and discussion

We monitored the activity on Facebook of the above-mentioned candidates using the Facepager tool from September 1, 2018 to March 16, 2019. In Table 1 we can see how the number of likes has changed over the reporting period, as well as an overview of the number of posts, shares and comments since 1.9. until the date of the first round of the presidential election.

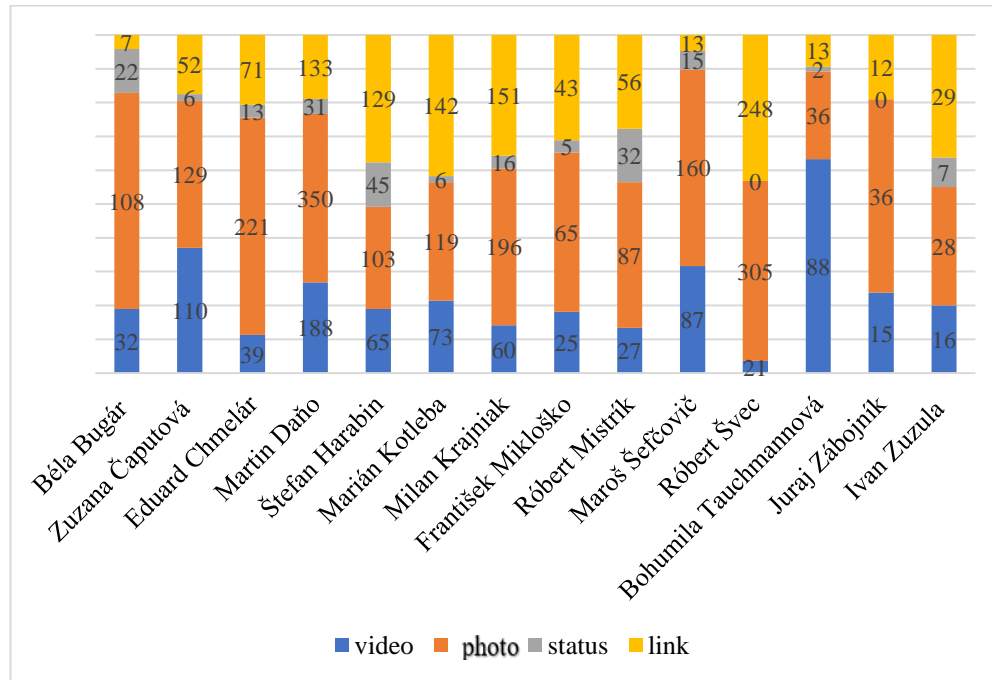
Table 1. Number of "Likes" on the Facebook pages of the individual candidates

Presidential candidate	No. of "Likes" as of 18 February 2019	No. of "Likes" as of 16 March 2019	No. of posts	No. of shares	No. of comments
Béla Bugár	25 048	25 339	176	2,425	9,572
Zuzana Čaputová	47 950	81 791	311	73,216	53,035
Eduard Chmelár	31 297	33 089	357	57,460	12,668
Martin Daňo	15 945	17 115	704	25,515	22,513
Štefan Harabin	37 990	43 333	343	100,214	40,538
Marián Kotleba	9 057	13 395	344	26,653	7,203
Milan Krajniak	38 485	41 908	423	55,414	34,373
József Menyhárt	14 235	Withdrawn candidacy on 19 February 2019			
František Mikloško	4 066	7 165	138	9,879	3,534
Róbert Mistrík	27 584	29 487	202	16,577	34,373
Maroš Šefčovič	13 620	19 246	275	11,335	28,771
Róbert Švec	3 865	4 062	574	11,515	3,687
Bohumila Tauchmannová	915	1 336	144	1,555	801
Juraj Zábajník	7 114	7 582	65	5,831	2,968
Ivan Zuzula	1 057	1 488	80	7,538	1,751

(Source: Author's own processing using Facepager, 2019)

Figure 3 shows what kind of contribution each candidate added to their social network. Mostly it was photographs, then links, video whereas the least added was status.

Figure 3. Type of contribution on the Facebook social network



(Source: Authors, based on research, 2019)

Subsequently, based on formula [1], we calculated the rate of interaction of individual candidates as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Interaction rate on candidate Facebook pages

Presidential candidate	Rate of interaction
Béla Bugár	1.1 %
Zuzana Čaputová	2.6 %
Eduard Chmelár	2.2 %
Martin Daňo	1.2 %
Štefan Harabin	3.3 %
Marián Kotleba	2.6 %
Milan Krajniak	1.5 %
František Mikloško	4.9 %
Róbert Mistrik	3.6 %
Maroš Šefčovič	3.7 %
Róbert Švec	1.8 %
Bohumila Tauchmannová	3.6 %
Juraj Zábajník	7.1 %
Ivan Zuzula	22.3 %

(Source: Author's own processing using Facepager, 2019)

The highest interaction rate of 22.3% was achieved by Ivan Zuzula. On the basis of the calculations, the candidate with the highest interaction rate should probably have the most efficient social campaign. It is impossible to say that about Ivan Zuzula because he only gained 3,807 valid votes in the elections. Čaputová, who received 870,415 valid votes in the elections and the interaction rate is relatively low at 2.6%. At the same time, Čaputová had a much more intensive Facebook campaign than Zuzula. This confirmed the risk of the indicator that if the number of followers grows faster than the number of interactions, the resulting interaction rate indicator is lower.

3.1 Second round of presidential elections - 30.3.2019

Using the Facepager tool in the second round of the presidential election, held on 31 March 2019, we analysed the posts of the two candidates, Zuzana Čaputová and Maroš Šefčovič, who had advanced from the first round.

The total number of Facebook posts of both candidates by this date is roughly the same: 356 in case of Čaputová, 349 from Šefčovič. The number of shares between the two weeks between the first and second round of the presidential elections has changed significantly. Čaputová's posts in this period, 118,792, were shared more than her opposing candidate, an increase of 45,576. Šefčovič's posts were shared 19,851, an increase of 8,516.

Similarly, the number of Facebook comments for the monitored second election period. The number of comments on Šefčovič's posts increased by 17,103. In the case of Čaputová, the number of comments increased rapidly, by 816,427. Given that Zuzana Čaputová succeeded in the elections, an increasing number of posts was evident. She received 1,142 comments on her last social post, in which she thanked all the people who supported her in the election. Maroš Šefčovič's post, in which he was congratulated by followers on the results of the elections, was commented on by 698 voters.

Finally, we applied a correlation analysis to answer the research questions on the pre-election campaign. Individual questions can be answered as follows; we followed the data for the first two questions up to 15.3.2019.

1. *What is the relationship between the number of posts and the number of shares?*

The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.337. Based on the analysis, we can confirm that this is a moderate direct linear dependence between variables. In this case, increasing the number of posts increases the number of social posts.

2. *What is the relationship between the number of comments and the results of the pre-election survey in the first round?*

In the pre-election survey, the candidate Róbert Mistrík was not evaluated as he withdrew his candidacy before the survey was carried out. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.746. It can be said from the analysis that this is a high direct dependency between variables. In this case, the increasing interest of voters-followers who respond with their comments to individual posts posted on the social network increases the potential interest in the candidate and thus increases the preferences of voters in the presidential election, as evaluated by Tănase (2015).

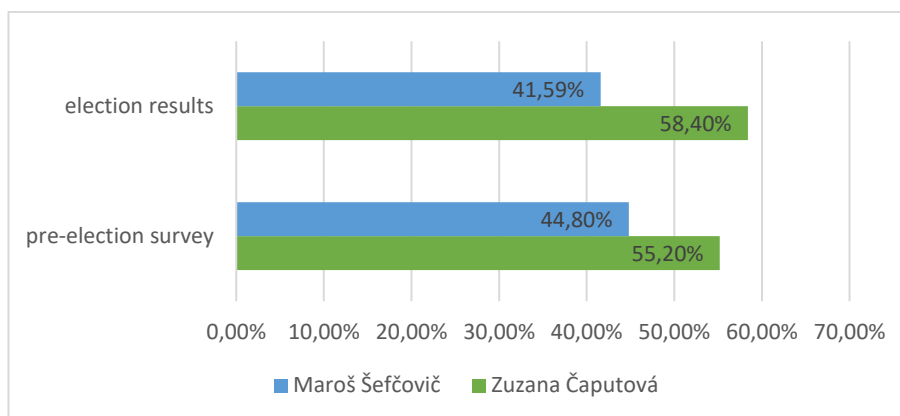
3. *What is the relationship between the number of comments and the results of the first round?*

According to the output of the correlation analysis between the number of comments on the social profiles of the candidates and the results of the presidential election in the first round of 16 March 2019, there is a high direct linear dependence between the monitored variables (Pearson correlation coefficient 0.684). Given our Facepacer data and the results of the first-round elections, this dependence shows that increasing the number of comments on posts posted on Facebook increases election success. The last two research questions (4. *What is the relationship between the number of posts and the results of the pre-election survey in the second round?* and 5. *What is the relation between the number of posts and the results of the second round?*) concerning the number of Facebook posts were recorded as of 31 March 2019 and we used the pre-election survey of the second round, which was carried out by the Focus agency on 30 March 2019. Due to the small sample size (two candidates), the statistical correlation analysis cannot be evaluated. Therefore, the following table shows the number of posts, the number of shares and the number of comments, and figure 4 shows the election survey and the results of the presidential elections themselves. As we can see in the figure, the higher the number of posts posted on Facebook by both candidates, the higher the preference of the pre-election survey, the higher the number of votes in the election results.

Table2. Number of posts, shares and comments on social networks

Candidate	Posts	Shares	Comments
Zuzana Čaputová	356	118,792	869,462
Maroš Šefčovič	349	19,851	45,874

(Source: Authors)

Figure 4. Analysis of the second round of the presidential election – 30 March 2019

(Source: Authors)

Simona Bubánová, a political marketing expert, and also the political commentator Milan Leško, say that social networks and social media also play an important role in the election campaign. Social networks have a big influence on voters. The information and recommendations that are spread by our friends are often more trustworthy. On the other hand, harmful information and misinformation also spread through social networks. That's why even Facebook, which served the candidates during the election campaign, manipulated the voters.

This year's presidential campaign resembles that of Barak Obama, who also built his campaign on social networks. That is why we can talk about an American campaign that is already moving to social networks even in the Slovak Republic. Many candidates were betting on a Facebook campaign, such as Štefan Harabin, who was more active on it and had no billboards anywhere in Slovakia. Based on research and communication with voters, people sometimes take a candidate for real when they see them on the billboards themselves.

Based on our analysis, it is clear that the number of comments from other voters influenced people's opinions more than the number of posts from the candidates. This means that people seemed to be convinced by comments on individual posts and statuses, which again corresponds to the findings of Tănase (2015). Therefore, we recommend that politicians focus on publishing such posts that will stimulate discussion, or the candidates themselves should also be involved in the debate and respond to the questions and suggestions of potential voters in the comments.

4. Conclusions

Based on the correlation analysis, we found the following findings: the more individual candidates add posts to their Facebook pages or profiles, the more their followers who engage in the discussions become aware of them. This

increases their viewership and the number of comments posted on posts as well as the post sharing itself. Therefore, if candidates are more active on social networks, voter preferences in election polls increase. The Facepager analysis tool confirmed the findings. The candidates Tauchmannová, Zuzula and Zábojník did not carry out their election campaigns very much using Facebook. On the other hand, Zuzana Čaputová, who was active on her Facebook page, had higher preferences.

In the future, both individual candidates and political parties should use social media during the election campaign. The big advantage is the effective gathering of feedback from voters, the dissemination of their own plans after the elections, the visibility of unknown emerging politicians and the possibility of promoting their policies. Undoubtedly, this is a very well-chosen tactic if the candidate pays for advertising on Facebook to increase visibility. Ultimately, it will gain the potential interest of future voters. An important aspect is that a social network campaign is low cost (much cheaper than classic advertising, billboards or flyers) and spreads very quickly among people.

However, it should be borne in mind in the future that social networks are not regulated and that there may be some form of violation of the electoral moratorium. Nevertheless, we can say with certainty that a social network campaign is important, justified and up-to-date nowadays. This type of campaign should certainly be used by candidates in the European elections to be held at the end of May or even for the parliamentary elections in 2020. Based on the analysis, we recommend running a campaign on social networks in the following steps:

- introduce followers to the election campaign and add a link to the campaign's page where appropriate,
- create so-called "meet the followers" events so the candidate is active on the streets, not just on a social network,
- add photos to the social network from events in which the candidate and followers are attending,
- notify followers with messages or status about upcoming talks / discussions on TV and radio,
- add a record of pre-election discussions held so that followers can see them again,
- add various polls on the election campaign on which followers can comment,
- ask your followers about goings on and the situation in the Slovak Republic,
- engage followers in social network discussions.

Other factors also affected the election results, e.g. the amount of the campaign budget, media support of candidates, i.e. which national media (whether television or the press, including online newspapers) have allocated how much space to each candidate. Likewise, who was behind the candidate (whether they had the support of celebrities, other political parties, how long the politician has been on the scene, etc.). We did not include these factors in our analysis, which is

the risk of the analysis, but we deliberately focused on just one area, a campaign on social networks.

Authors Contributions

The authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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