The extreme right and the Internet: The case of the People's Party Our Slovakia

The Internet is commonly presented as a crucial modern tool for the development and diffusion of information, communication among people and has raised hopes about its role of engagement of civil society in democratic processes (Caiani & Parenti, 2013). It can, however, also be easily misused for several purposes, including spreading of extremist propaganda and xenophobic attitudes among the public. While the images of established parties and politicians can be transmitted through the mainstream media, the extreme right groups, especially those parties and movements outside of the political arena, have a bigger problem to reach broader public and thus need other channels for the ideology to find its way to the public and resonate with potential supporters (Mudde, 2007). The presence and activity on the Internet is particularly important for new and so far unsuccessful parties because they usually lack money, internal organization and personnel, and are often unable to engage in traditional propaganda campaigns (Mudde, 2007). Therefore, the websites and social media accounts, which are more difficult to censor, serve as a good way to spread their messages to at least some part of the society. This holds true especially for less relevant extreme right parties.

Throughout the world, the usage of the Internet by the extreme right is generally on the rise and all major extreme right groups have websites (Caiani & Parenti, 2013), and many of them are the best websites in their countries (Mudde, 2007). Moreover, the growing popularity of the Internet and the social media over the past years also increased the prominence and attractiveness of extreme right's websites and social media profiles. Studies show that extreme right parties use the Internet for different political persuasion tasks and skilfully use a variety of styles and forms of discourse(Caiani & Parenti, 2013), often relying on the Internet in order to avoid police investigation and prosecution (Caiani & Wagemann, 2009). Scholars point out that today the extreme right exploits the Internet largely for diffusion of their ideology and messages, enhancing their identity, rallying supporters, and intimidating political adversaries. It thus serves mainly as a medium for propaganda and recruitment of potential adherents (Caiani & Parenti, 2013), especially as it reduces the costs of communication between a large number of individuals (Caiani & Kroel, 2014). The extreme right actors usually do so by

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hosting martyr stories and leaders' speeches, presenting narratives about actions of the party and news reporting, pin-pointing enemies through the websites(Caiani & Parenti, 2013), often more freely on the Internet as through other communication channels (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002).

Online activity of the People's Party Our Slovakia

Despite the fact that the extreme right tends to be quite active in the online arena, the People's Party Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS) had, until recently, a rather limited public presentation and activities on the Internet. This was especially so until late 2014. After early 2015, the party changed the design of its main website, making it more user-friendly and embarked upon rather regularly updating its content. This has come a year after the party's leader Marian Kotleba saw his electoral success on the regional political level in Autumn 2013. Even though the party failed to make it to the national parliament, Kotleba as a candidate of the ĽSNS has become a governor of the Banská Bystrica region in the 2013 regional gubernatorial elections. This change in the website appearance could be linked to Kotleba's victory and available resources resulting from the newly gained political position and indicates the increased importance given by the party to online presentation.

In the online arena, ĽSNS has run several websites and both the party and the party leader have had social media Facebook pages, but the overall activity has been restricted in the amount of presented content, the reach, and the gained feedback. The party officially runs three websites: first, the lsns.sk website, which presents only basic information about the party such as party objectives, party statutes, information on membership and contacts; second, the main webpage of the party, naseslovensko.net,[1] which offers information regarding the official party activities, mainly in the form of short statements or reports on future and past activities such as demonstrations or public meetings; and third, the party runs regional party sections on Wordpress, an open source blogging system, but is making updates infrequently with only a couple of entries a year. The graphic design of the main party webpage naseslovensko.net was basic in design and in rather poor visual quality until early 2015 when the party redesigned its website as mentioned above. Though still lacking interactive content, the webpage is now better structured, looks more professional and visually attractive and makes it possible to like and/or share the articles on Facebook, Twitter or Google+, share it via e-mail or receive notifications about new content from the website.

1 The page is redirected from www.mariankotleba.sk.

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Moreover, the content presented in the blogosphere is similar (usually identical) to one published on the party's website. Only one-third of the blogging page has interactive content; however, the readers make comments to the posts very rarely and the comment function has been often deactivated. Within the social media, the party and its leader have been active on the Facebook social networking site, but have no profiles on others such as Twitter or Tumblr. On Facebook, the party's fan page called *Naše Slovensko* (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, 2013)reached 72,358"likes" by the end of 2014 (as of 30 December 2014), but decreased to 66,725 "likes" after several months (as of 6 May 2015). What's more, the party's page has been active since 20 January 2010, which coincides with the date of the party's official registration. Several members of the ĽSNS were also active in the political formation called Slovak Togetherness– National Party (SP-NS), which was dissolved by Supreme Court in March 2006(Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic, 2013). In 2010, these members took the name of the previous (essentially politically inactive) movement[2] to form the People's Party Our Slovakia. Marian Kotleba's fan page on Facebook has been active only since 13 March 2013, however, this is due to the fact that the party's leader had established several Facebook pages before the formation of his last social media profile that was created half a year before the 2013 regional elections, but it is unclear who is the admin that manages the fan page.

Nevertheless, the leader's fan page called *Marian Kotleba* (Kotleba, 2013)reached 47,575"likes"by the end of 2014 (as of 30December 2014), but similarly as the party's fan page decreased to 46,917 "likes" after several months (as of 6 May 2015). However, just days before the first round of the regional elections, the leader's Facebook page had only around two thousands "likes," but by December 2013 – two weeks after the elections –it reached more than 25-thousand and was increasing throughout the entire 2014.

What can we learn from this?

Despite the party's seemingly luke-warm online engagement, their online activity should not be dismissed as ineffective, given other party and leaders' activities before the elections and the election

2 The party Wine Lovers Party was registered in October 2000. It changed the name to the People's Party of Social Solidarity in May 2009. In January and February 2010, the party transformed into the People's Party Our Slovakia (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic 2014).

results themselves. In the 2013 regional elections, Kotleba had not launched traditional political campaign, nor had any billboards or political meetings throughout the region, and according to his own statement (even though this can be challenged) during the press conference after the election's first round, the campaign cost only 5,000 Euro. Although Marian Kotleba's visibility in the media rose rapidly after the first round of the elections when he ended up in second place, his presence in the media immediately before the elections was rather scarce (Kluknavská, 2014). Moreover, his overall media appearances were mostly restricted to demonstrations, incidents, and marches that the party organized, usually in connection with the Roma communities or historical anniversaries related to (war-time) Slovak state.

In this light, we can cautiously draw two important points. The Internet does not appear to be the most crucial tool in spreading the ideology of the People's Party Our Slovakia or in mobilizing potential supporters, but at the same time, the activities of the extreme right in the online arena can at least partially serve to examine how the party utilizes the Internet in order to set its agenda and encourage voters to action. Although we cannot conclude that the online activities accurately reflect the visitors' actual political views or political ideology, we are convinced that the Internet is among the best channels for researchers to study these groups that are otherwise difficult to investigate due to their unwillingness to communicate and distrust towards the outsiders, including academics. There are several reasons for this. The extreme right to some extent expresses its views on the Internet and does so rather freely in both the legal and pragmatic terms, especially when trying to avoid prosecution of the state and legal measures applicable to mainstream media. Further, the party's activity on Facebook is not far behind the online engagement of other mainstream parties. In addition, by examining the party's online engagement and interactivity, we can learn a lot about the topics, which are the most resonant with their audience and about the way, in which not only the party, but also the party's supporters communicate.

ĽSNS and the Internet: future research
The future research should ask the following: how much and in what way do the extreme right party ĽSNS and its leader use the Internet as a tool of communication and for spreading the extreme right ideas. It is important to look for the most resonant topics in the online discourse of the party and its leader and to analyse the language used when talking about different issues and actors. Looking at the

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period 2013-2014, during which the party competed in three different elections (regional, European, and local), the preliminary results show that the ĽSNS is more active on the party Facebook fan page than on its leader's fan page.Differentiating between different types of posts, namely external links, photos, (textual) posts, and videos, both the party and the leader posted mostly external links to other web pages. The party's leader on his wall posted mainly photos, while the ĽSNS has included also various posts. Both the party's and the leader's fan pages featured a range of issues, mostly promoting the party itself, presenting strong negative stances against the ruling establishment and mainstream parties, and expressing negative attitudes towards the Roma through calls to fight "Gypsy extremists" or "parasites." The anti-Roma sentiments have prevailed in the discourse of the party since the re-shaping of the party in 2010(Kluknavská, 2013), after the 2006 dissolution of the SP-NS and almost a four-year political inactivity of the movement's core members. After Kotleba was elected governor, the posts included his statements as an official representative.

With the EU elections approaching in May 2014, the party's hard Euro-scepticism and EU-rejection resurfaced, referring to negative, even destructive aspects of Slovakia's EU member ship for citizens. The local elections brought issues such as the abusive and corrupt aspects of the rule of the current political establishment vis-à-vis the citizens. The most "liked" and commented posts on Marian Kotleba's fan page were connected to the regional elections (mainly his statement after the first round of the elections and thank you post to his supporters and voters after the second round) and holiday greetings (such as Christmas, New Year's, or Women's Day).The most "liked" and commented posts on the party's Facebook page included the expressions of satisfaction after the parliamentary elections or calls for demonstrations and protests. The preliminary results also indicate that the core of the party's or politician's online supporter shave also often been the fans of self-proclaimed independent and alternative news portals or web pages of movements. It is also interesting to note that even though Marian Kotleba's Facebook fan page has had fewer followers than that of ĽSNS, it received more user activity in terms of "likes," comments and sharing of posts.

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