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# The Populist Leaders' Affinity Towards Alternative Media on Facebook in Slovakia[1]

**Abstract:** This study explored the personal-ideological affiliation of selected populist leaders to alternative media based on their permanent "liking" on Facebook. It was found that the assumption that populist leaders "like" (both figuratively and literally) alternative media is incorrect. Boris Kollár, Speaker of the Parliament and one of the most active politicians on Facebook, did not use the button "like" at all, while Igor Matovič, then the Prime Minister of Slovakia, selected and "liked" some pages, but he preferred quality mainstream liberal news media. The electoral system's specifics may help explain why populist politicians play a key role in their movements and why social media are so helpful for them in this process.

**Key words:** Facebook, Button "Like", alternative media, Slovakia, Matovič, Kollár, populism

This article is focused on how the Facebook (FB) tool (button) "like" was used by selected populist leaders in Slovakia. More precisely, the primary interest was finding whether alternative or any other media/news sources were preferred or clicked more or less permanently as "liked" by selected populist politicians. For this research, the FB profiles of two populist leaders – Igor Matovič and Boris Kollár – were selected in April 2020[2] in Slovakia. The selected populists chaired parties *Ordinary People and*

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[2] If not mentioned otherwise, all data refer to this period.

*Independent Personalities* (*OĽaNO*)[3] and *We are a Family* (*WAF*), respectively.[4] According to the 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset, *OĽaNO* showed 7 degrees magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale, while *WAF* showed 7.8 (indicators: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people centrism and anti-elitism)[5]. Both parties and their leaders (Igor Matovič and Boris Kollár, respectively) just happened to move from their long-term role in opposition to being members of the government or in executive positions (as a short-lived Prime Minister or the Speaker of the Parliament, respectively, from March 2020 to April 2021). Thus, the key research question – do they “like” the alternative or any other (mainstream) media on their FB pages – was even more relevant. Also, another issue can be addressed later on, i.e., whether their new political-social status is reflected in this communication area. Moreover, the selection of these two leaders for further analysis was also relevant from the perspective of social media use in political communication. The total number of Igor Matovič’s interactions in 2020 – 6,370,753 – was bigger than that of all other Cabinet members combined (Tóth, 2021).

Before proceeding further with our analysis of “likes”, it is essential to discuss the country specifics important for understanding political communication in general and social media in particular, with a special focus on the major nation-wide campaigns. It is also relevant to discuss the political party spectrum in Slovakia and the local understanding of the alternative media. Otherwise, any interpretation of the findings may be either impossible or incorrect. Discussion on the methodology is to be found in a separate paper.

## The Political Communication in Slovakia

With the partial exception of the Hungarian ethnic parties (those that have their core electorate in the South of the country), all relevant po-

[3] The full name is OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti, NOVA, Kresťanská únia, ZMENA ZDOLA. It has changed its name three times since its founding. This change reflects legal requierements of electoral law in case of coalitions.

[4] It was used typically used abbreviation in the former case, and own suggested abbreviation in the latter case. There is no established local abbreviation for Sme rodina, and occasionally used foreign abbreviation “SR” does not seem to be clear enough. In the Slovak language, “SR” means abbreviation of the official name of the state.

[5] https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B, see more in Maurits Meijers and Andrej Zaslove, *Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (POPPA)* (2020), https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B, Harvard Dataverse.

litical parties have a nation-wide reach without a need to consider the regional specifications. Importantly, Slovakia constitutes only one electoral district for all nation-wide elections, including the elections to the European Parliament. It means that a politician on the list of candidates of any political party stands for the whole territory of Slovakia. It is a unique electoral system among V4 countries (Frank, 2020). Consequently, the leaders of political parties or their executive committees play a decisive role in the selection of candidates or, at least, in setting the rules of the game (Spáč, 2016). As a result, somewhere between a third and half of MPs have domicile in and around the capital city (Lichý, 2016). Moreover, this explains the important role of political leaders in general and in the case of populist political parties in particular.

At the same time, Slovakia has a preferential voting system at a national level. It means that a voter can show his/her preference for individual candidates (maximum four) of a political party or movement that could move them forward on the final list. Therefore, some candidates try to address voters individually through various media and communication tools to get preferential votes. However, voters have a positive bias towards candidates listed at top and bottom positions on a list, while support for top-ranked candidates significantly increases as the size of the list increases (Spáč, 2016).

Although in populist movements, leaders generally play an important role, this is even more true for the Slovak party politics (Kopeček, 2004; Žúborová, 2011). Until social media expansion, there was a consensus that dominant, usually “charismatic” leaders, are typical for populist policies and populist parties, although it is unclear what is the correlation and causation here (Barber, 2019). Apparently, “populism and leadership constitute phenomena that are both complementary and distinctive” (Viviani, 2017). More specifically, the “leadership explains the chameleon-like nature of populism” (Soare, 2017). Currently, some populist leaders can be better described as “provocateurs”, “drunken dinner guests”, or “entertainers” (Nai, Martínez, Coma, 2019). Both movements and leaders discussed here actually present the two latter types of politicians. That, together with the specifics of the electoral system, makes the populist use of social media an important factor not only during electoral campaigns. Moreover, the type of electoral system may explain why populist politicians play the key role in their movements and why social media are so helpful for them. The type of national electoral system also contributes to voters’ disenchantment with their MPs, thus further nourishing populist

attitudes (Beblavý, 2015). Finally, the relatively high popularity of “alternative”, or more recently used term “controversial”, sources (to be discussed later) raises questions about how this popularity of alternative media sources among audiences is reflected among populist leaders and their movements/parties. Among the public interested more frequently in news and current affairs issues (i.e., less than half of the population),[6] about one third (13%) preferred alternative websites, while about two thirds (28%) preferred mainstream media in December 2019 (TIS, 2020).[7]

## The Populist Political Parties/Movements *WAF* and *OĽaNO*

*WAF* and *OĽaNO* are formed around their strong leaders who dominate both parties. In general, these are not standard textbook political parties or movements (Školkay, Žúborová, 2019). Both *WAF* and *OĽaNO* have been using populist elements since they were established. The OĽaNO movement led by Igor Matovič can be best described as an ad hoc political group without a typical party organisational structure and, until forced to do so by the law, without a relevant membership base. Similarly, the “WAF” movement “WAF” is a pool of the little-known party members associated with its charismatic and media proficient chairman Boris Kollár. Frič and Gyárfášová (2019) label both political entities as populist, anti-establishment parties. *OĽaNO* was seen as an anti-establishment or ideologically non-transparent movement (Dolný, Malová, 2017; Gyárfášová, 2018). For example, Garaj (2018) highlighted *OĽaNO*’s rather *ad hoc* reactions to current issues. While inclination to small and medium enterprises may have indicated the centre-right ideological location, its focus on Roma and social issues, in general, may have suggested the opposite ideological orientation, according to Garaj. Marušiak (2017) called *OĽaNO* (similarly to *WAF*) a ‘business firm party’ or ‘owner party’.

[6] Here it is assumed that those interested in politics more actively by and large overlap with those who read regularly dailies. This number was 30% in 2019. Of course, this thus just an estimate. Median, *MML-TGI národný prieskum spotreby, médií a životného štýlu Market & Media & Lifestyle – TGI. Základné výsledky za rok 2019* [*National Opinion Poll on Media Consumption, Media, and Life Style*], Median, 2020, https://www.median.sk/pdf/2019/ZS1914SR.pdf.

[7] TIS, *Dezinformačné weby pravidelne číta každý siedmy* [*Disinformation Webs are Regularly Read by Every Seventh Person*], Sme, February 2, 2020, https://transparency.blog.sme.sk/c/526887/dezinformacne-weby-pravidelne-cita-kazdy-siedmy.html.

Balfour et al. (2019) saw *OĽaNO* as a conservative populist party that is pro-EU. During the 2019 campaign for the EP elections, it presented a program of social conservatism. Its core issues were family values, combating unemployment, and providing increased state assistance to the Roma minority. In comparison, *WAF* was seen in some aspects as a right-wing, Eurosceptical, populist, anti-immigrant party aiming to “protect families in Slovakia from threats outside and inside”. It expressed conservative values and strong anti-immigrant sentiments. *WAF* heavily promoted its European alliance with nationalists Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Le Pen (Oravcová, Plenta, Vicenova, 2019).

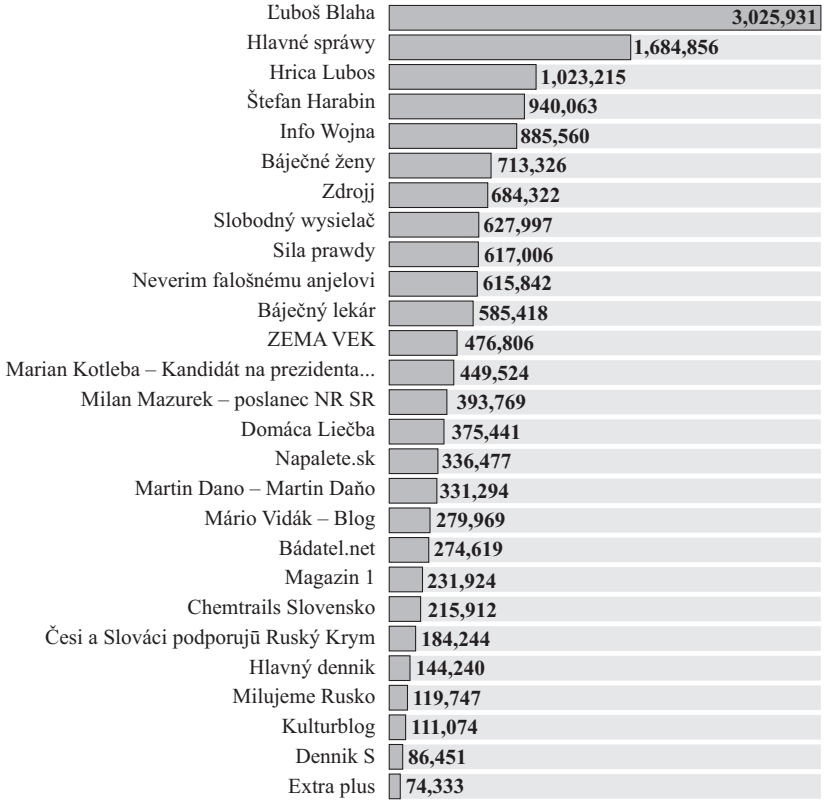
## The Role of Social Media and Online Communication

The communication strategy of political parties in the legacy media and on social media was adapted to the mentioned aspects of the political and electoral system. Politicians in the national elections in Slovakia always have to address all citizens. They seldom specifically target a certain region. Within this communication mix, multiple information sources are converging on FB. Therefore, it is important to review the most popular/important and, at the same time, the most controversial online news outlets and other sources influencing public opinion, both shared via social media and their own websites. Struhárik has compiled such a list for 2019 (based on calculating together likes, commentaries and shares on FB using CrowdTangle and Socialbakers tools/data and probably finding inspiration in an earlier compiled list of controversial websites) that is presented in Chart 1 (Struhárik, 2020a).

As Chart 1 shows, among the most popular controversial online sources, one can find the most popular “controversial source” the FB site of the Member of the Parliament Ľuboš Blaha, a radical-left politician from the *Smer-SD* party[8]. Blaha was the politician with the highest number of interactions (6,589,704) on FB in 2020, surpassing even Matovič (Tóth, 2021). However, he cannot be seen as a typical alternative media source. He was a source of alternative opinions. On the one hand, his communication activities were supported by advertisements on FB, and on the other hand, he published only on FB (with 59,000 likes, 73,000 followers), although some of his FB comments were reproduced at the leftist

[8] He became party member in 2020.

**Chart 1. The Most Popular Online Sources with Controversial Content**




**Source:** Struhárik; TIS, *Dezinformačné weby pravidelne číta každý siedmy* [*Disinformation Webs are Regularly Read by Every Seventh Person*], “Sme”, February 2, 2020, https://transparency.blog.sme.sk/c/526887/dezinformacne-weby-pravidelne-cita-kazdy-siedmy.html.

portal noveslovo.sk.[9] Tóth (2021) concluded that a “great majority of his contributions are attacks *ad hominem* and he also often disseminates disinformation or lies”. Interestingly, FB banned his FB page in June 2022, following pressure from the local authorities.

[9] https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/?__tn__=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARA4RaPlG6SP2rAyJUnaoAyks_L_lZzYf1dJsFvGiI-VDjO2Yx_DtdgAK03ckpQoY31wI2rXsL9beKit.

The second most influential source was the “*Hlavné správy* website (“Main News”) which represents a typical “alternative” news source. It is actively present (hyperlinked) on FB[10] with some 50,000 “likes” and 55,000 “followers, besides the website itself.[11] It has a misleading name for an uninformed observer.

Surprisingly, there was a third popular subject, by and large practically unknown in Slovakia, Ľuboš Hrica, a Slovak living in Italy. After examining his FB and YouTube output, it was found that in his online communication, he supported the activities of both *Kotlebovci-ĽSNS* and Matteo Salvini, the chairman of the Lega party in Italy (that is affiliated with *WAF*). Half of the 20 most popular (“most interacted”) controversial contributions, as compiled in Chart 1 (mostly YouTube contributions put on FB), was produced by this person alone (Struhárik, 2020a). Nevertheless, it is shown later that Hrica is not connected to *WAF* as a “liked” site.

About half of the controversial sources, as presented in Chart 1, can be seen as main news and current affairs websites. Then there are two major groups: websites devoted to specific “alternative” politicians and a group of news sites focused on “alternative” healthcare. All controversial news sources were present on FB (some of them either temporarily or permanently blocked by FB).

Among the 100 most popular controversial contributions on FB in 2019, only three were related to “alternative websites”. It was mainly the result of an algorithm used by FB – priority in pages is given to videos, photos, pictures, and statuses (Struhárik, 2020a). Alternative media, or media in general, do not necessarily prioritise videos, photos and statuses.

What was meant by “alternative” or, as it is increasingly more commonly used, “controversial” media sources in Slovakia?

## The Alternative – Controversial – Disinformation Media

Although the first “alternative broadcast” could be identified already in 2006 in Slovakia, the current revival of alternative media can be connected with the events of late 2011–2012 (Dobrotková, Chlebcová Hečková, Kuciak, 2019). There was a key event that has impacted Slovak politics since then – the Gorilla scandal (Školkay, 2018). The mainstream

[10] https://www.facebook.com/www.hlavnespravy.sk/.

[11] www.hlavnespravy.sk.

media failed to provide relevant information about this example of a partially captured state (Školkay, 2019).

However, it is normative to claim that some FB activism or online (or offline legacy) sources are disinformation activities (Juríik, 2020). Krajči Konzelmannová (2020) pointed out that “theoretically there is no alternative to the mainstream media in Slovakia since the mainstream media do not accept such media types since these are associated with negative connotations based on disinformation content of these (alternative) media”. For example, when Tibor Rostás, the editor-in-chief of one of such outlets, appeared on the programme of an academic conference in 2017, many participants, including the representatives of the mainstream media, cancelled their participation in that event (Mk, 2017). Peter Bárdy, the editor-in-chief of the aktuality.sk online news portal divided the media landscape in Slovakia in 2020 into “conspiratory media versus democratic media” (Bárdy, 2020). Similarly, the Catholic Church issued a list of “alternative” (and implicitly, conspiration media), further divided into religious (Gloria.tv, Svetlo sveta, Christianitas, Aliancia za nedeľu) and those more secular ones (Infovojna, Badatel, Zem a vek, Slobodný vysielač). Obviously, “liberal” media (as a separate category) have been mentioned as “transparent” cases (Kramara, 2020). In fact, Slovakia seems to be unique in using its own informal or popular typology of alternative media based exclusively on their normatively negatively seen content (Krajči Konzelmannová, 2020). As shown, Slovakia belongs to the countries where alternative media are seen as a relevant source of information and opinions for important sections of the population.

There are two ongoing trends here. On the one hand, there is a changing terminology among fact-checkers and fake news debunking organisations when they increasingly put these activities and sources under a more neutral umbrella term “controversial” instead of outright “fake news” and “hoaxes” or disinformation (Sawiris, Kuchta, Forgon, 2020). This development was in part caused by a legal complaint by one of these websites (hlavnespravy.sk) that protested against being included in a list of “fake news and hoaxes” (Preventive Measure 13C/6-2019/268) or to have blocked income from ads because of this labelling (3Cob/39/2019-301).

On the other hand, authorities, including courts, have issued verdicts targeting the content of these “controversial” sources as problematic from a legal point of view. Tibor Rostás, the editor of a monthly *Zem a vek* magazine, was sanctioned with a 4,000 EUR fine in 2019 for publishing an anti-Semitic article in 2017. This journal (with two affiliated FB pages) was

already banned from sale in some supermarkets in 2018 (Tvardzík, 2018). Also, an occasional increasing intervention from FB can be noticed, leading to decreasing reach of controversial websites in 2020 (mk, 2020; Struhárik, 2020b). For example, the FB pages of *Zem a vek* were cancelled in late 2020. Moreover, the Police raised criminal charges against controversial web portal *badatel.sk* in early 2021, following an initiative by the Minister of Health regarding the dissemination of inflammatory news related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these online alternative media were banned by the state authority during the Russian-Ukrainian war in early 2022.

Kapec (2019) considers that in the Slovak context, “alternative media” include sources that: spread information that do not get space in the mainstream media at all or only marginally; that often but not exclusively are run not by professionals; their content includes unverified information, alarming news, disinformation, and conspiration theories; or they are different in their artistic output from the mainstream in a higher quality of productions and reception; and, finally, they present alternative in the technological progress, or completely a new way of production, distribution or reception of media outputs.

From the point of the basic typology, the alternative media, according to Kapec (2019), in the Slovak context, can be understood as community and school media, disinformation media, alternative art media, and media using advanced technology. This classification is perhaps imperfect (e.g., where to put alternative media that do not promote fake news and hoaxes and are neither “arts” such as *poleblog.sk*?). Nonetheless, Kapec believes that using “fake news” is a defining feature of disinformation media in Slovakia and thus allows to put them into a separate category. Moreover, local disinformation media typically lack professional staff, and clear identification of an author is missing, or at least a pseudonym or editorial shortcut. Finally, these media are often produced only online (Kapec, 2019). There were almost 200 online portals with “controversial” content (Konšpirátori.sk, 2020). Indeed, these were mostly websites. Only exceptionally, there was also a print version of the alternative websites as it is in the case of the *Zem a vek* (Earth and Age) magazine, which claims to be the “only truly alternative magazine in Slovakia” (Z&V, 2020). There are some “alternative” online only radios, too (e.g., *Slobodný vysielač – Freedom Radio, slobodnyvysielac.sk*). Moreover, many blogs affiliated with the mainstream media can be seen as “controversial” (Struhárik, 2020c). An older list of pro-Russian websites focused on the audiences in Slovakia and the Czech Republic is available and an investigative ar-

ticle that analysed the connection between the local politics and these pro-Russian websites (Šnídl, 2018; 2015). Ižak (2019) used the term pro-Kremlin media “because of their efforts to spread the content that suits the Kremlin”. Ižak’s “representative sample was made of the *Hlavné správy* website*, Slobodný vysielač* (Freedom Radio) online radio and *Zem a Vek* printed journal also with its own websites, based on their high audiences. Sawiris and Klingová (2019) selected following FB pages that they saw as “problematic”: *zdrojj, Ľuboš Blaha, hlavné správy, Zem a vek, Slobodný vysielač, Ľuboš Hrica, Infovojna* and *Sloveni*. These FB pages were selected based on the following criteria: the publication of disinformation content documented via *blbec.online*, the number of fans, people talking about the page, and the inclusion of the page in the campaign itself. Finally, Mintál and Rusnák (2019) identified as “conspiratory” the news sources *hlavnésprávy.sk* (by far the most popular, based on the number of visits calculated as a monthly average for February-April 2019), followed by *infovojna.sk, bajecnezeny.sk, slobodnyvysielac.sk, trendweb.sk, badatel.net, domacaliecba.sk, zemavek.sk, bajecnylekar.sk, napalete.sk.* Interestingly, the popularity of these websites on FB suggests that all of them are more often visited directly rather than via FB. For example, *hlavnespravy.sk*, the most popular website online, had almost 40,000 followers on FB (May 2019) but more than 7.5 million average visits.

It is complicated to separate various evolving factors and changing definitions that play a role here. However, there are indeed some quite popular alternative sources, of which the majority seem to include (more often than is the case of the mainstream media) controversial content, and some are seen as disinformation sources (See for example RTVS, 2018). The examples of those alternative/controversial/disinformation sources are shown throughout this text. One can wonder what is a more permanent interaction of selected populist leaders with this specific media ecosystem? Can we find some of these media or similar sources among those “liked” sources? That is why this analysis turns to some specific cases of populist leaders on FB.

## The Facebook pages “Liked” by Boris Kollár and Igor Matovič

Boris Kollár, the leader of *WAF,* did not “like” (in the definition used here, Chart 2) anything permanently on FB. The FB analysis shows that he was “followed” by more than 140,000 people. The other members of

the party had a maximum of 20,000 followers and a FB page. *WAF* of 114,000 followers as of April 2020.

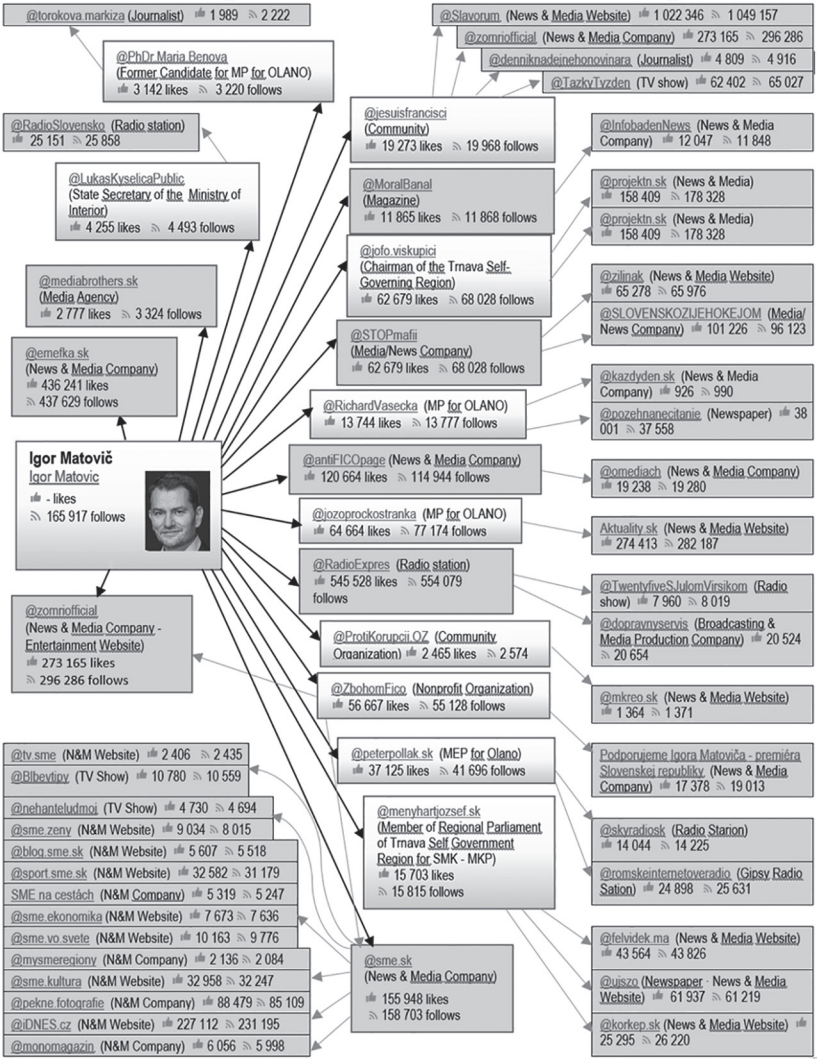
In contrast to Kollár, Igor Matovič’s “private” FB page (Chart 3) liked 26 pages, and was followed by 83,000 followers in March 2020, but by 200,000 followers in late May 2020 (the numbers were quickly growing in the weeks following general elections on February 29), and had 3,400 (self-declared) “friends”, while by comparison *OĽaNO*’s FB page was followed by 230,000 followers as of May 2020 (after the general elections). Shortly before, during and after the general elections in late February 2020 (i.e., between January 10 and March 19), Matovič posted four posts a day on average. In fact, despite not using paid promotions (which is not possible on a private profile), Matovič reached the biggest number of interactions on his FB page during the same period among the top political leaders (KK, 2020a).

In short, while Kollár was more popular than his party, for *OĽaNO,* the opposite was the case – the movement was more popular than its leader. Nonetheless, the *OĽaNO* leader was rather active and successful in using FB communication despite its formal limitations.

**Chart 2. The Boris Kollár’s “Liked” Pages on Facebook**

Fortunately, Boris Kollár explained his attitude towards alternative news sources: “If these portals such as *‘Hlavné správy’* will bring truthful information, I have no problem sharing it. However, I definitely won’t share hate and fake news” (Kern, 2020). It was found in 2022 that Kollár had in fact business relationship with selected alternative media. His movement paid for advertorials in “Hlavné správy”. This was ironic considering that his movement voted for legislation that temporarily banned this website in 2022 (See: B Kollár, *Keď Hlavné správy zapnú, opäť si u nich zaplatím reklamu*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_dOGRAheMc, 15. 6. 2022).

**Chart 3. Igor Matovič’s Facebook with “Liked” Pages**




## The Analysis of Igor Matovič’s “Liked” Pages on Facebook

As mentioned, Igor Matovič, who did not have a public page on FB (but the so-called “private”), “liked” 26 FB pages (Chart 3). Among those

pages, there were a few media sources – liberal newspaper *SME*[12], traffic *Radio Express* and a web page dedicated to a page posting morbid humour called *Zomri*, as well as the most popular entertainment portal *emefka*, a media agency, a no longer functional alternative news portal (*moralbanal*, last entry 2015), two anti-Smer/anti-Fico FB pages that are themselves (or based on available options offered by FB) categorised as news media companies. He personally still managed his FB profile during the first months of his premiership (Mikušovič, 2020). Moreover, Matovič explicitly rejected an offer to have a public FB profile (KK (2020b).

It should be noted that Matovič, as Prime Minister, called the public to “like” his FB page in support of an idea to get engaged in an early vaccination programme against the COVID-19 pandemic two of his closest relatives in December 2020. The aim was to achieve at least 10,000 (new) “likes” and “loves” (hearts) for this particular proposal[13]. If this number would not be reached, the PM declared that he would still accept vaccination on his own body. He could not do it immediately since he had just finished his quarantine period. This call was supposed to help persuade citizens who did not believe in vaccination. This idea and political marketing approach were criticised by many local observers on moral and political grounds. It was a typical example of populism that “thrives on bottom-up processes and the lateral relations among the imitating and inventing crowds...” (Hoyng, 2019). This story was mentioned as an example of how “likes” can be used for direct political communication with citizens.

## Conclusion

In general, alternative news media has been seen almost exclusively negatively in Slovakia by analysts and by the mainstream media. However, this attitude is slowly changing in terms of terminology and definitions, towards more neutral approaches or more nuanced theoretical conceptualisations. Instead of alternative media/sources, field analysts (engaged in the information disorder analysis and debunking) increasingly use the term “controversial”. However, some academic analysts still accept the term “disinforma-

[12] Self-defined according to its Code of Ethics: “Fundamental Values: Newspaper SME cherishes values of personal freedom, justice and decency. It attempts to enforce these values in a society through its work”. https://www.sme.sk/dok/20449554/eticky-kodex-dennika-sme-a-vydavatelstva-petit-press.

[13] https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221106318980080.

tion” sources while retaining a more diverse terminology for other forms of alternative media. Be that as it may, although Igor Matovič and Boris Kollár, leaders of two parties (*OĽaNO* and *WAF)* which constituted the core of the government four-party coalition in Slovakia in 2020, showed bold populist characteristics, they did not match the assumed theoretical popular model of a populist leader leaning on the support of “alternative/controversial/disinformation” media or exchanging information with them. There was no such a permanent connection in either direction on their FB pages in both cases. Moreover, neither of the examined top political leaders used the FB function of “liking” as a reference to another FB page or external link either as a tactical or strategic political communication tool. “Liked” links on FB for one political leader seemed to be only *ad hoc* supplements.

Boris Kollár, the Speaker of the Parliament, and one of the most active politicians on FB, did not use the “like” tool at all, while Igor Matovič, who has no public but just private FB page, selected and “liked” some pages but there was no clear pattern or political communication strategy behind this selection. In any case, neither the leader preferred the alternative/controversial/disinformation news sources that spread fake news or hoaxes. Matovič preferred the quality of mainstream liberal news media. Typically, he also preferred the “black humour” pages that heavily rely on politics in their topics.

Even such limited references are certainly an interesting indicator of the political-ideological preferences of a governing political party leader in Slovakia. Matovič has always been known as a political showman, in some interpretations, even as a clown and certainly as an entertainer (Mikušovič, 2021; Bárdy, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that his preferences reflect his political passions that include fighting against corruption or injustice in general, showmanship and a sense of humour, and ideological affinity to the quality liberal media[14]. Indeed, Michalcová, Vavrovičová and Blasbalg (2020) concluded that Matovič is a “populist-lite” politician – not using too much polarising populism on FB (Kepplová, 2020).

Considering interactions of the electoral system, party system and political campaigning, especially during elections campaigns, one can assume that both the local electoral system and political campaigning on social media are supporting, even strengthening, if not enabling, factors of success of the populist politicians. The party system is irrelevant for populist politi-

[14] See for example his longer personal profile in: N. Hrabovská Francelová, *Unpredictable, controversial, but the only one to defeat Smer. Meet Igor Matovič*, “The Slovak Spectator”, 2020, March 1, https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22338284/the-man-who-defeated-smer-who-is-igor-matovic.html.

cians – it can be seen as background rather than as backbone of the political life. Social media, especially FB, enable to bypass gate-keeping roles of the mainstream media. The alternative media do not seem relevant – be that a positive or negative – factor for populist political communication. Indeed, in a broader theoretical context, perhaps surprisingly, this analysis suggests that both politicians can be seen as heavy or light (not including the “othering” strategy in the case of the latter) populists in their rhetoric, respectively (Marincea, Školkay, 2020), show no personal preference on their FB pages for any alternative/disinformation media that disseminate fake news and hoaxes. Thus, populist politicians (and populist political parties) have no specific affinity toward “alternative/disinformation” news sources. It can be partially explained by the fact that FB is a sufficient communication tool for their purposes (of which they cannot utilise all its tools). However, this finding also proves that although populism presents an alternative politics, it may not be seen as having any permanent relationship with the alternative sources, especially those understood in a local context as based on fake news and hoaxes (Haller, Holt, 2019).

This study highlights possible further research questions: How come those populists do not like media sources that are locally widely seen as “controversial” and promoting “alternative” news, thus, theoretically or presumably, symptomatic and sympathetic to “alternative” politics as presented by populists? What can political psychology tell us about a politician’s publicly liking certain people, institutions (media) or topics? What role does a populist party/movement communication play on the social media in studied examples in contrast to the leader/chairperson’s communication roles? How should we understand “controversial” media sources in an academic analysis? Would a change in the electoral system/legislation impact success of the populist leaders?

Finally, as mentioned, the data collected here provide a useful, structured, little-known and permanent (in contrast to the elusive and changing archival capacity of online databases) overview of the personal preferences of the populist leaders towards (not only) media sources in the early phase of communicating on FB in Slovakia.

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**Stosunek słowackich liderów ruchów populistycznych wobec mediów alternatywnych na Facebooku**

**Streszczenie**

W ramach badania przeprowadzono analizę osobisto-ideologiczną przynależności ideowej wybranych populistycznych przywódców do alternatywnych mediów w oparciu o ich trwałe „polubienia” treści na Facebooku. Stwierdzono, że założenie, iż populistyczni przywódcy „lubią” (zarówno w przenośni, jak i dosłownie) alternatywne media, jest błędne. Boris Kollár, przewodniczący parlamentu i jeden z najaktywniejszych polityków na Facebooku, w ogóle nie używał przycisku „lubię to”, podczas gdy Igor Matovič, ówczesny premier Słowacji, wybrał i „polubił” niektóre strony, ale preferował wysokiej jakości liberalne media informacyjne głównego nurtu. Specyfika systemu wyborczego może pomóc wyjaśnić, dlaczego populistyczni politycy odgrywają kluczową rolę w reprezentowanych przez siebie ruchach i dlaczego media społecznościowe są dla nich tak pomocne w tym procesie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Facebook, przycisk „Lubię to”, media alternatywne, Słowacja, Matovič, Kollár, populizm

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