

BLOG MARKETING AS A POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE PHENOMENON IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION?

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Abstract

The importance of political communication is important in terms of the success or failure of political parties. The current trend of internet marketing is realized through blogs that have entered the Internet scene with a revolutionary speed and have gained great popularity. They have also strengthened their position in political communication as a tool for effective Internet communication of political party campaigns. The aim of the paper is to point to blog marketing as a phenomenon that is used in the political communication of political parties. The paper is methodologically based on secondary data obtained from the web portals of individual political parties in Slovakia, in order to find out the quantity of the contributions to the elections compared to the thematically different contributions presented by the selected political parties. The secondary research was focused on the selection of contributions about the elections to the Self-governing Regions. Contributions were encoded on a negative-neutral line, then the data were sorted and compared, within each political party. The aim of the paper was to compare the number of contributions but also the level of media coverage of the elections themselves, compared to themes that are thematically different.

KEY WORDS: Political Communication, Blog, Marketing, Self-Governing Region

INTRODUCTION

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century is mostly characterized by great socio-economic transformations and the rapid development of new technologies, while the Internet is considered the biggest phenomenon of these changes. This huge network of interconnected computers has gradually become a part of the society and it opens new opportunities, penetrating into all areas of life.

This is closely related to the development of Internet marketing (see more about internet marketing, e.g: Epstein, 2007). From this point of view we can see the Internet as a new source of communication opportunities with customers as well as a precise targeting tool for selected customer groups. Even though the classic Internet presentation has become part of every corporate communication,

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today it is becoming inadequate and inefficient, as modern society is taking a new direction.

The current trend of online marketing is in using blogs or vlogs that have entered the Internet scene very quickly and have become very popular (see also: Harfousch, 2009). They have also strengthened their position in political communication as a tool for effective Internet communication of political parties' campaigns (see about communication of political parties, e.g: Owen, 2008). The aim of the paper is to point to blog marketing as a phenomenon that is used in the political communication of political parties. As the title suggests, this instrument of party political communication can be either positive or negative.

Methodologically, we rely on secondary data obtained from the web portals of individual political parties in Slovakia in order to find out to which extent the selected political parties reflected the posts to the elections to self-governing regions in 2017 compared to the thematically different posts. Then the secondary research was focused on the selection of posts which deals with the regional elections in October 2017, shortly before the elections were held. Consequently, by a simply coding of posts on a negative-neutral line, the data was counted and compared within the political parties. The aim of the paper was to compare the quantity of posts, but also the level of media coverage of the elections, as opposed to different topics they dealt with. The aim of the paper was to find out to what extent media devoted themselves to the elections in self-governig region in the short pre-election period and, at the same time, whether the political parties themselves considered the themes of the elections the most important subject of communication, as opposed to themes of a different nature.

1 BLOGS AND BLOGGING

A blog can be considered a special type of continually content-refreshed website, including information and personal posts on a particular topic that are sorted by the current update - the latest posts are always at the top of the page. An important feature of a blog is also the readers' ability to comment on individual posts, which increases their interactivity and creates space for a discussion. People who are writing on these weblogs are interested in sharing their daily comments and opinions with joy and worries of everyday life and therefore their focus is varied.

A blog is almost always created and written by one person who is passionate about some issue and wants to communicate with the world. It's an interesting and simple way how to present oneself on the Internet. In order to get involved to this new fashion wave of presentation, a person does not need special knowledge

of HTML, programming, and graphics. Creating a blog is nothing complicated and with simple software available, it can be created by its author in a few minutes, without the need for additional registrations, fees and hosting.

Technological developments have caused a huge influx of blogs and the world blog scene is constantly growing. Every single day there are created almost a hundred thousands of these new Internet blogs, which means that a new blog is created every second. Still more and more people are using the way to find information through the blogs. Although interest in blogging among Internet users is not decreasing, some people reject this unusual form of Internet communication. They do not understand the importance of blogs and compare them to the newspapers and magazines they are used to. However, blogs are misunderstood only by those people who do not read them regularly.

How did blogs get to the Internet scene? Most people think they have been the phenomenon of the past few years. However, it is not true. They have existed since the beginning of the Internet itself. The term “weblog” was created in 1997 by John Barger as a reaction to the fact that he always had to log into the web (web log) when he wanted to make a post. The term weblog was later abridged by Peter Merholz only to the blog, and in 1999 the word weblog was ironically split into a “web log”. And 1999 was an important milestone when blogging began to gain popularity.

Thanks to a constant technological progress, blogging has developed so much in recent years that bloggers can make their blogs “decorated” with different types of multimedia. It is possible to upload on blogs pictures, videos, music files, etc. And on this basis, according to their characteristics and content, they can be selected into individual groups:

- a) Linklog - is a blog that provides links to websites,
- b) Photoblog - a blog enriched with photos, accompanied by short comments,
- c) Vlog - a video blog whose posts consist of videos from different sources,
- d) Tumbleblog - brief information and combining multiple media.

Because the spectrum of blogs is diverse, there are many options how they can be used. Still more and more companies see their strength in building customer relationships and they consider them a new potential for product promotion. For this reason, we can talk about the so-called blog marketing (see also: Kaplan, 2011). For the organization, the blog marketing is a simple and effective way to put ideas on the market, increase sales, build a brand, and also penetrate into market thinking, because most blogs allow readers to leave comments.

Thus, product or service providers have the ability to respond flexibly to real or potential clients' questions and professionally highlight the positive aspects of the product or service. This way the customer can ask about everything he wonders without having to go to the store or call the info line. For the company, such an immediate response means an interesting opportunity.

It is remarkable what all blogs can be used for. Their content page allows applying to any area. In terms of classification, blogs can also be distinguished by their usage patterns, i.e., whether they are used for internal or external communication. Internal communication uses knowledge and collaboration blogs, e.g. at Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein company there are knowledge blogs used as a source of information for business analysts. Collaborative blogs used in business make the working process easier, as they enable reporting or community building functions. In external communication, there are more possibilities how to use the blog:

- a) Informative and Service Blog - serves as a news site for news release.
- b) The Product Blog – it is used as one of the tools of communication by small, less-known companies that offer special products, for example organic food.
- c) CRM (Customer Relationship Management) blog - works as a website designed to communicate directly with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders in order to maintain credibility and positive relationships. A very good example is McDonalds, which uses its blog *Open for Discussion* to communicate its social responsibility, such as comments on environmental support.
- d) CEO Blog - Through this option, CEO Managers can interpret current industry topics based on general or private experiences. Hewlett - Packard and IBM are the most well - known companies that use this type of communications.
- e) Campaign Blogs - They are largely short-term blogs and are used to support political campaigns to open a policy dialogue. The literal explosion of such blogs was experienced by the United States in the recent presidential election.
- f) Crisis blogs - They are suitable for use in crisis situations in the company to create a dialogue with affected interest groups. They can also represent the equilibrium defense of a company when it comes to a negative blog.

While blogging seems at first sight to be a very simple tool, a thoughtful communication strategy is the key for the success of the blog. This first misconduct can cause a negative reaction of the target groups and consequently their loss.

Therefore, before creating a blog, it is necessary to determine the intention of what we want to achieve by establishing it. It is also necessary for its successful functioning. It is necessary to adhere to three basic rules, which are content and value adding, conversation and straightforward testifying. Adding content and value is based on the fact that when creating a blog, it must be counted as a long-term commitment. The information and the course of communication must be constantly checked, refreshed and complemented; otherwise it loses its informational value. Conversation is considered the key for success in the blog world. Engaging in conversation and confessing your own mistakes is another important aspect of blogging. It is not possible to persuade the participant of the opposite, and they should be learned also from the negative feedback. The straightforwardness of testimony is a very important principle, which means that a blog participant should be honest – it is not a good solution to be pretending being someone else, because deception can be revealed sooner or later, and that's the reason why the blog loses credibility.

The phenomenon of blogging and blog marketing struggles on the one hand with positive perceptions but on the other hand with negative perceptions, too. The positive aspects of the blog are based on the fact that they are an amazing tool for marketers to tell their original messages to their customers, while offering a unique opportunity to get direct feedback from all interested groups, allowing them to engage in an active dialogue. They have become an adequate tool for PR, and their great advantage is financial difficulty. The cost of creating them is almost or totally zero, and their maintenance does not require big finances (Kupec, 2014). Negative aspects include the dangers of negative blogs about products or services or other areas of society. Brand and product blogs are not only found by companies themselves but also by customers. Each unsatisfied client has the opportunity to share his experience with the broader public. It is also the case when sharing experiences with problems in society. However, a negative comment is not always based on truth, it can also be imaginative. The issue of blogs is based on security reasons. The information is mostly available for the public and there is a risk of leakage of false and harmful information. Therefore, it is very important to distinguish your blog from the others, through online spots or banners.

It is remarkable as blogs penetrate into individual areas of the entire society. (See also: Allen, 2010) By their existence they influence, for example, political campaigns as well as public opinion. Linking blog marketing to political issues is currently a very attractive way of presenting views, attitudes of political parties to different areas of society.

Political communication has changed over time, adapted to new trends and demands of the electoral base, but at the same time reacted to the increasing

informatisation around the world. Traditional communication tools that favored direct contact among a voter and a politician are often less well-known addressing tools than web-based or social networking campaigns. Authors often point out (See, e.g.: Dahlgren, 2009) that traditional media such as television or radio are no longer playing such a strong role in the process of gaining electoral support. New forms of political communication such as, for example, blogs that appeal to potential voters, sympathizers. They are a tool for influencing individuals in political campaigns.

Political communication at a time, when the notions of democracy or citizenship are being questioned, takes a completely different form. Both political journalism and election campaigns respond very sensitively to the established new trend, but at the same time pushing it a step forward, compared to the past. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) outlined the three political epochs that have evolved over time. *The first era of political communication*, also called the “golden age” of political parties, was specific by a high trust of society in a political party but also by the politicians themselves. The reasons for the authors are different, but for us it is important to mention the very low media communication and, conversely, the high communication of personal character. In this period, the voters took decisions without the influence of the media, and many times there was a state where generations of inhabitants chose the same candidates or political parties, without any change. A bit more advanced was the *Second Era of Political Communication*, the time horizon of which can be selected from 1960 onwards. In a very simple comparison of these two periods, a significant shift in technological advancement of the society takes place over the previous period. The direct confrontation of the voter with the politician was more limited, on the contrary, a plagiarized advertising strategy began to emerge, which negatively influenced and simultaneously constrained smaller political parties that did not have a high financial capital. The parties that had such capital used television campaigns in prime time for the simple reason- to reach as many people as possible. Leaders began to work on high-quality and representative presentation of their visions and ideas, while trying to avoid unpleasant issues or to be prepared for them. For a potential voter, this meant a situation when he got an opened space for political support, new parties often emerged, and simplistic behavior was no longer perceived as before. The high degree of flexibility in electoral behavior has also changed the way of political competition, when campaigns of a permanent type or a negative focus were becoming preferred. *The third era of political communication* used almost all of the aspects mentioned above. Families and societies began to tend to digitalization, the demand for television receivers increased, and the magnitude of media use in election

campaigns proportionately increased. In addition a massive shift of information through the media, the company also mediated through computers and ICT technologies. This age was based on time-based political communication and campaigns. Politicians used professional arguments, they also significantly performed themselves more professionally, and public opinion polls also began to take a crucial part in the communication. There were many specialists for a specific field in the campaigns who pushed political marketing to a higher level. Rationalizing the company by increasing the availability of information has also contributed to a current situation.

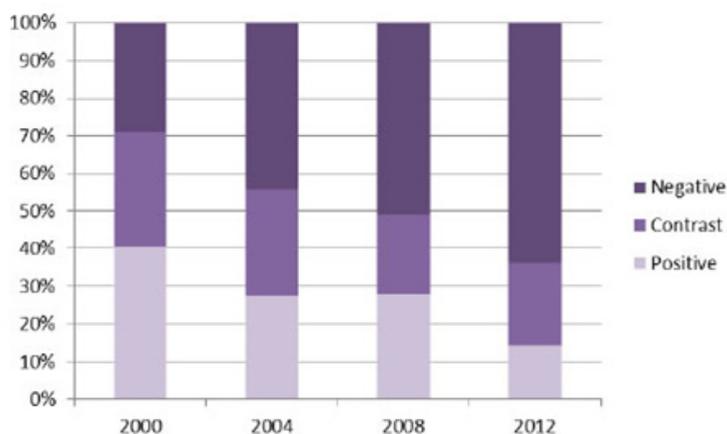
In a technically high developed era nowadays we can see that other techniques for selling information to society are also at the forefront. Politicians use web feeds or social networks to enable them to engage in direct interaction and adjust their political agenda. Compared to the past, the way of permanent political communication and campaigning is being used at this time. This term was described by the journalist named Blumenthal in 1982 as a phenomenon in which political parties or politicians themselves seek to maintain the popularity of the electorate through a long-term lasting, never-ending campaign in order to strengthen the popularity of the political subject (Conaghan, de la Torre, 2008).

In this context, however, it is worth mentioning that blog marketing in connection with the political communication of a political subject can also bring different difficulties. This is primarily about the negative nature of blog marketing. Communication through the blogs that are focused on related competing political subjects can be associated with a negative nature. The struggle for power sometimes has no inhibitions, and through blogs the public can be reached out with information that affects them to the detriment of the political subject that the blog was concerned with. The negative nature of blogs must also be perceived, because negatively tuned blogs certainly do not benefit the particular political subject. Blog marketing itself may not only relate to information of a positive or neutral character. Political subjects or individual politicians also use it to attack their political opponents. The presentation of negative information is currently a trend that can reach a wide range of people. The posts themselves, which are slightly more personal, are written by the political leaders themselves or the media teams of a particular political party can have a significantly higher impact on society. It is precisely from this point of view that a targeted communication of this type, mentioned in Figure 1 below, cannot be excluded.

Voters' tendency, according to many opinion polls, points to the fact that a negative campaign can reach a potential voter more than a campaign of neutral, informative or positive character. In defining what a negative campaign is, Hayes (2006) described it as an attack of a political candidate on his opponents in order

to deprive them of electoral support and subsequently strengthen his support for own position in the elections. As a result of the increased number of negative campaigns, it becomes a dangerous tool for politicians who present extremist views and statements in their programs and thus they threaten the stability of democracy in the country. In this case, as well as in the classic campaigns, the media play a crucial role (See also: Patterson, 2016). The media often use conflict as a source of information that is interesting for the viewer. Negative campaign supporters say that this kind of campaign is very successful and widespread across the world, as evidenced by surveys that were watching the 2000-2012 US election cycles. This type of campaign, according to Lau (2007), influences not only the gained support of the political party itself in the elections, but also the demobilization of the population and the decrease of the electoral participation. In simple terms, subtracting negative information disgusts the voters to such an extent that they will not go to vote in an elections. According to research, this hypothesis was confirmed, but only to a minimal extent. If a negative campaign was used, the turnout of the surveyed sample decreased only by 0.07%. (Lau, Sigelma, Rovner, 2007) In Slovakia, specific research of this type is absent. However, we can assume that increased campaign negativity, which is visible, negatively influences electoral participation. For example, we can go through the election year 2002, where 70.07% of the eligible voters appeared to the polls, while in the elections in 2016, it was only 59.85% of voters. (Statistics, 2016). The Wesleyan Media project has compiled a table that highlights when the political advertising got significantly more negative in the last few years.

Figure 1: Negative policy campaigns in America, with the horizon of 2000 - 2012



Source: Ordway, Wihbey, 2016

Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy, a book written by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1993) defines three types of negative campaigns. *Contrast ad* was meant a campaign aiming to create a direct contrast between the attacker and those who are attacked. It can be stated that the priority objective is a direct threat to the candidate, which will result in a reduction in the preference or reputation. *Veiled Attack* is a type of negative campaign whose main objective is to direct the public to information that directly damages the opponent. It also has the task of damaging the good name of the opponent, provided that the striker is distancing himself while avoiding the boomerang effect. The third and most used negative campaign in Slovakia is the so-called a *Negative Ad*, whose objective is to use trusted negative information in order to influence voters' behavior. (See also: Mattes, 2015)

The research method used in this type of work is mostly focused on the field of content analysis. Individual blogs, based on strictly defined methods, are qualitatively selected on the basis of the individual thematic areas concerned by the political party. However, in our studies, blogs are understood to be short messages, that are informative, similar to short messages, for example on the Twitter social network. In our case, the most important was the choice of political subjects. Such a choice was conditioned by the active participation of political parties in the National Council of the Slovak Republic, or by elected political subjects in the 2016 elections. The analysis therefore resulted in the selection of 7 political subjects that were lawfully elected in the elections. Subsequently, it was necessary to select the time period of the examination. In this case, the analysis focuses on marketing, or communication of political parties, through blogs (contributions), on political subjects. The reason for choosing October 2017 was the theoretical fact, mentioned above in the paper, that the parties often seek to engage the voter base by a very negative campaign when the tendency of absence of a campaign of a true but also less assertive nature. It was also aimed at identifying the proportion of blogs specifically devoted to elections to the self-governing region. Methodologically, we have selected the posts that contained a specific reference to the elections in the self-governing region in their content and mentioned the election as well. Based on this direct methodological approach, the data presented in the analytical part of the thesis were obtained. Content analysis carries elements of subjectivity, but with clearly defined methodologies, these deviations are minimal.

2 NEGATIVE CAMPAIGN IN ELECTIONS TO SELF-GOVERNING REGIONS

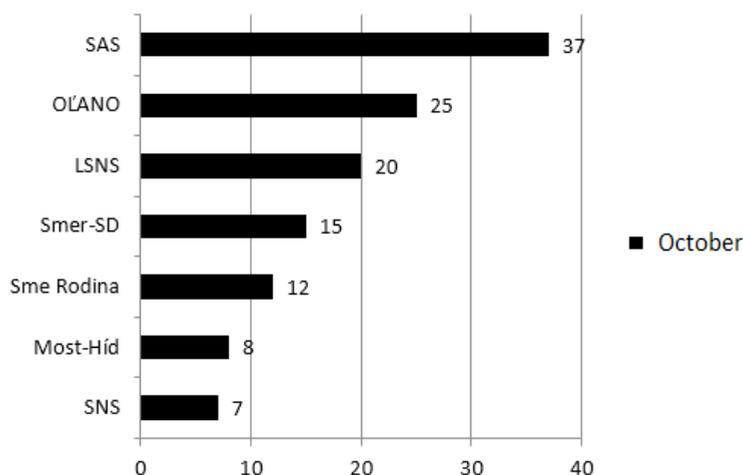
The permanence or campaign negativity in Slovakia has been visible for a long time. Political scientists agree that this type of communication is very effective because it can create a deep and difficult boundary between the attacker and the victim. The most aggressive way of communication is mostly used by parties standing against each other, on the one hand coalition against opposition and vice versa. The last parliamentary elections in 2016 have highlighted the situation when political parties chose this kind of campaign. The parties in the debates did not present their programs, but they were often negatively defined against the rivals. This way of communication polarized the society and therefore the voters did not have the opportunity to learn more about the programs of a potentially supported political party. Some political subjects did not even process the program sufficiently and relied on a well-organized negative campaign, mostly against a governmental party or coalition partners.

Recent elections to self-governing regions have confirmed this. The cooperation of the opposition parties against the coalition and negative campaign brought them success. It cannot be confirmed or disproved whether this situation has been a consequence of the general aversion of society to the current policy performance, or that the negative campaign has been successful again. This content analysis will provide an overview of the communication of political subjects through their website during October (elections were held in November 2017). The posts that were not directly devoted to elections to self-governing regions in 2017 will be also analyzed. The analysis will therefore provide a comprehensive overview of the extent to which the political actors have dealt with the elections and, at the same time, the extent to which the negative political communication is visible. Moreover, it should be noted that web-based communication was not a priority tool for addressing voters. We can consider this type of communication an addition to the direct communication or communication through social networks. The websites of some political parties therefore contain only very little information about the current socio-political events in Slovakia and therefore they are not sufficiently filled by information.

Figure 2 points out the quantitative aspect of published posts (in the form of blogs) on the website of individual political parties. In this respect, the most active parliamentary political entity in Slovakia has become the opposition party *Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*. Governmental party Most-Híd also uses its website actively, and in October they published 25 posts. Looking at the least active political parties, the least active are *Smer-SD* and *Sme rodina*. The party

of Robert Fico published only 15 posts, but looking at the long-term lasting trend of using this form of communication by this party, it is nothing special. The party is being promoted mostly through Facebook's social network, individual profiles of candidates on their social network. The party has recently begun to use Instagram, but traditional media also contribute to higher media coverage. The party therefore chose a strategy where its priority is not to put on its website as much information as possible, but rather to provide basic information to potentially new members or visitors who want to learn more about the party. Opposition political parties, with the exception of the LSNS and the movement *Sme rodina* use this communication channel to a high degree.

Figure 2: Quantitative view of posts (in the form of blogs) published on the pages of political parties during October 2017

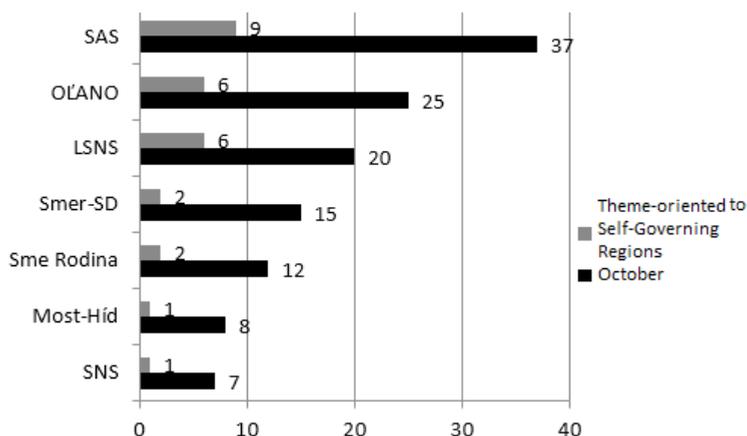


Source: Processed by authors

Figure 3 shows the quantitative aspect of the posts (blogs) that have made the elections to the self-governing regions. The political party SaS on its website dedicated the biggest space to the topic of elections. It can be said that almost every second post was devoted to the November elections, to the support of their candidates, but also to the criticism of the coalition candidates. From the point of view of the contents, it is clear that the parties have concluded a cooperation agreement before the elections, when the phrase “Chance to change” appears on the web. Similarly active were also the members of the LSNS. From an overall perspective, the opposition was also more active on this scale, and they also

sought to support their candidates in order to obtain a good electoral result. Candidates' profiles were presented on the website as well as their speeches, or their specific proposals for solutions that they would like to implement in case of their election success. As mentioned above, the coalition partners almost did not dedicate any space for a topic of regional election. The governmental party Smer-SD has mentioned election in just two posts. Posts (blogs) have just called for election support with the slogan "vote for our better home". It should be mentioned that the governmental parties have a different media status compared to opposition parties. Bigger media space gave them the possibility of "ignorance" of this communication way, and at the same time the possibility to rely on the "soundness" of the names of the individual candidates. It is interesting to mention the fact, that the Slovak National Party presented its candidates for the posts of chairmen of the VUC, but it did not use this method to such a great extent as could be expected. We cannot forget that the political entities have got a real numbers of visits on their websites. Therefore, it can be argued that with low numbers of visits, the parties have no reason to increase their activity through this type of political communication.

Figure 3: The total number of posts (blogs) vs. posts (blogs) devoted to election to self-governing regions during October 2017

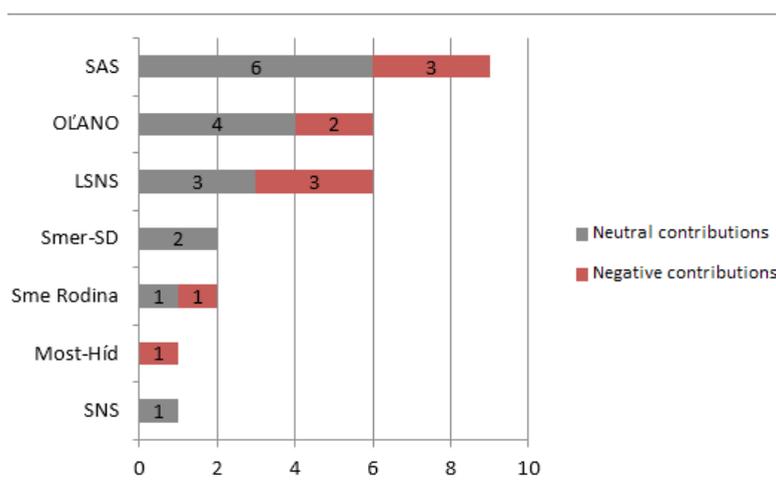


Source: Processed by authors

Figure 4 shows the proportion of negatively-oriented posts (blogs) on the websites of political parties. As already mentioned in the theoretical part of the

paper, the negative campaign is being used still more often. The media theory also claims that this type of information is more interesting for the society than positive information. The most negative posts were published by the opposition political parties SaS, OĽaNO and LSNS. It can be concluded that the party SaS criticized mostly Milan Ftáčnik- the former candidate for the post of the chairman of the VUC of the Bratislava, then funding the campaigns of Kusý and Frešo, but also used a negative rhetoric towards the candidates of coalition parties. OĽaNO party pointed out unfair election practices that could negatively affect the democracy. And similarly to their partner SaS, they criticized the coalition partners for a vision of change that is close. LSNS, which did not cooperate with opposition parties, mainly focused on its negative rhetoric on the situation that had been visible in the country before Marián Kotleba was elected as the VUC chairman. The party also pointed out the sale of the property of the region to obtain funds or ignorance of the media in the elections. Posts (in the form of blogs) generally criticized the coalition candidates, poor road conditions, or promises that were not fulfilled. The coalition parties did not use the negative campaign. An exception was Most-Híd. The only contribution to the election was also negative. In this case, the party criticized the procurements in the Trnava Self-governing Region for the management of roads.

Figure 4: Rate of negatively oriented posts (blogs) related to elections to the self-governing regions during October 2017.



Source: Processed by authors

CONCLUSION

The era of high-speed Internet access is used for the political communication of political parties in Slovakia. The impact of Internet communication in political communication appears in several forms. Our intention was to point to the use of blogs as a tool for marketing political campaigns of selected political parties. Posts in a form of political party blogs have been used sufficiently, even though their content has not always been consistent with one current topic. We can see that blog marketing appeared naturally in political campaigns and was used as a communication tool in political communication towards public. Blogs as a tool for political communication are currently very attractive tool and we consider them a current phenomenon in the era of Internet communication in the society.

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