

titul Breaking the Legacy of the Past –
Establishing Independent Public Opinion Polls in Slovakia

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Introduction

Let me start with a brief very personal reflection. As a sociologist by training ten years ago I have been working at the Institute for Philosophy and Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences. My own experience with public opinion polls was only theoretical. We knew that there exist an institute, which conducts polls, however, the results were strictly confidential, not addressed for the public but for the “Central Committee”. The majority of social scientists worked on pseudoproblems within the five-years-plans. It was exciting – as a professional but as a citizen as well - shortly after November 17, 1989 to carry out spontaneously the very first polls and to outline the first reactions of public to the historical events. Abruptly, we were allowed to ask openly and the citizens replied honestly, non-patiently and happy that somebody is interested in their views and attitudes. This was my real professional satisfaction. Since that exciting and extraordinary days the public opinion polls became the apparent part of the public life. They provide the feedback for the general public, politicians, institutions and other actors. To my opinion this change is irreversible. The independent public opinion survey underwent very complicated development within last decade. It was criticized not from professional but political positions but never disappeared. Their position is not that now the politicians should follow the vox populi, however, the polls reflect all the stereotypes and prejudices, they provide us a mirror which help us to overcome them.

ESTABLISHING THE MARKET OF POLITICAL INFORMATION

Before 1989, the communist party power colonized also public opinion research. In those years of political non-freedom, hardly anybody was aware of the existence of the Public Opinion Research Institute in Slovakia. Only those few, who came in touch with this organization, knew that the selection of research topics and the interpretation of findings were strictly obeyed the ideology of “building society of real socialism”, they knew that pollster employed in this organization were forced to describe „politically harmless“ topic, which would not contradict the communist party’s politics. Moreover, the prevalent atmosphere of fear and hypocrisy in the society was not favorable to public opinion polls. It was not expected that the respondents, who drew their lessons from Communist persecutions and purges, would dare to express their authentic beliefs and opinions. Under these conditions, Public Opinion Research Institute produced strictly confidential materials often containing questionable findings. These materials were distributed to animated group of Communist party nomenclature.

After 1989, the principal barrier to public opinion polls – the communist party’s monopoly on truth – was eliminated. Together with the renaissance of right to free speech, an opportunity for the citizens to express their opinions in public polls emerged.

Within the first months after November 1989, the „political information market” was established. Along the research groups existing at several state institutions (for instance Public Opinion Research Institutes in Bratislava and Prague, Journalistic Research Institute, and Methodological and Research Department of Slovak Radio), also several new institutions were established such as the nationwide AISA, GfK, and the Bratislava Center for Social Analysis. Years 1990-92 marked literally a boom in public opinion polls conducted by Slovak and Czech research institutions. The society under transformation turned in an existing object of analysis, a real “social laboratory”. In these years several Czech-Slovak comparative surveys indicated deep differences in how the Czech and Slovak population perceived the transformation. The agencies examined largely also a hot political topic of that time, namely the split of the Federation.

After the split of Czechoslovakia, publicly accessible information from opinion polls was reduced: the Czech polling agencies either terminated their activities in Slovakia or limited the publication of their finding. In Slovakia mainly the Public Opinion Research Institute at the Statistical Office, the Methodological and Research Department of Slovak Radio (MVK), and the FOCUS agency conducted systematic researchers.

The 1994 elections marked a milestone not in the politics (victory of HZDS movement followed by setting the governmental coalition of HZDS, Slovak National Party and Association of Worker of Slovakia, which was in power for 4 years) but also in the public opinion polling. Around the election the debate about the polling results and their impact on public opinion and voting behavior was raised. Ms. Bútorová, who has been involved in polling as a researcher in FOCUS, wrote:

“Publication of survey results raised different reactions among political representatives among commentators and representatives of some parties responded to unfavorable findings in keeping with the motto “ the best defense is attack” by labeling the researchers as lacking in professional competence and/or politically biased or partisan. The temptation proved to be especially strong for leaders and sympathizers of smaller parties with uncertain parliamentary future ..they raised objections to surveys mostly on a selective basis and tended to put against the “untrustworthy” institutions, accused of biased information and voters manipulation, . The “therapeutically measures” proposed by frustrated politicians or political commentators reflected the political culture to which they adhered: in better case, they incited their voters not to take surveys results seriously, using as argument mostly unacceptable political profile of the researchers.The harshest criticism of the “bearer of bad new” was voiced throughout the pre-election period and after the elections by the victorious Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. Thus, according to A.M.Huska (top ideological leaders of the party) ...the elections rejected the scandalous manipulation with the public opinion polls. All polling institutions including those, which gained recognition in the past, were deliberately deceiving the public in order to incite a herding effect.... This mass manipulation should end up before a court. In addition to intimidating independent polling the HZDS representatives are openly trying to obtain a monopoly over information concerning the awareness of Slovakia’s population. Immediately after the elections, the idea was expressed to set up a centralized institution for the creation (sic!) and survey of public opinion, conspicuously reminding of the Orwellian Ministry of Truth.” (Bútorová 1995: 151-152)

Later developments did prove the worst expectations. Public opinion finding about the most sensitive topics practically disappeared from the public agenda. The public Public Opinion Research Institute at the Statistical Office UVVM modified its strategy and stopped monitoring the voting preferences of political parties and the credibility of politicians. In other words institution that carry out opinion polls using taxpayer money avoided topics in which the public takes a keen interest.

In this situation, the private agencies FOCUS and MVK to a large extent had to assume the role that government institutions generally play in keeping the population informed about changes in public opinion regarding current political developments. Several agencies focused only on non-political marketing surveys.

FOCUS was able -at least for limited time- to continue with the project “Current Problems of Slovakia” - rather extensive series of social surveys reflecting the social and political development in Slovakia. The project was enabled thanks to U.S, funding from National Endowment for Democracy and other foreign funds.

ELECTION SURVEYS – MOST DISCUSSED SPHERE OF ACTIVITY

In late 90s several new agencies (Markant, Názory, Incoma and others) have been established, the market became booming especially before the parliamentary elections in 1998.

In September 1998 Slovak citizens for the fourth time participated in free elections to choose their parliamentary representatives. The elections were also the fourth opportunity for institutions conducting pre-election and exit polls to verify their professional aptitudes. The 1998 elections were overshadowed by the tense atmosphere in society associated not only with the significance of the elections for Slovakia’s future but also with the widespread concerns that they might not be conducted in a fair and democratic manner. Under these circumstances, independent opinion polls played an extremely important role.

Surveys of voter behavior do not have a long-standing tradition in Slovakia. Pollsters and analysts cannot rely on many years of experience and consistent empirical findings that would enable them to more accurately forecast the voting behavior of population groups. The commitment of voters in Slovakia to political parties is still rather weak, which is reflected in a lack of stability on the political scene.

As in 1994, in the period before the 1998 elections there was a growing campaign to discredit independent opinion polls. The daily *Slovenská Republika*, which was close to the HZDS, spearheaded the campaign by attempting to create scandals around the polling agencies and by labeling them in an effort to undermine the credibility of opinion polls in general. Because of these attacks against independent polls and the increasingly tense atmosphere in society, respondents became more reluctant to take part in sociological surveys.

The status of opinion polls in the pre-election period was further aggravated by the amendment to the election law that extended the moratorium on disclosing findings on voting preferences from seven to 14 days before the elections. As a result, the last opinion polls before the elections could not reflect the impact of a substantial portion of the election campaign. The public was therefore denied access to information about changes in voting preferences and about the latest trends just before the

elections. This also meant that polling agencies found it more difficult to predict the election outcome.

During the days of the elections, three exit polls were carried out. The MVK conducted an exit poll in cooperation with private TV Markíza, the NCMK performed one for state-run Slovak TV, and FOCUS conducted a survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute. In their exit polls, the MVK and FOCUS were able to offer accurate forecasts of the performance of all parties except for the HZDS and SDK. Both agencies underestimated the HZDS performance and overestimated that of the SDK. Similar difficulties in projecting the HZDS results based on an exit poll were encountered in 1994 since some of the respondents approached by pollsters either refused to answer or did not tell the whole truth. Such respondents were to an above-average extent elderly people and those with elementary education, both of which are typical of the HZDS electorate. With each HZDS voter who refused to answer, the probability increased that the pollster would approach an SDK supporter. This “systemic error” was influenced by the specific features of the two largest parties’ constituencies and by the general political climate in society, which in 1998 complicated opinion polls.

The parliamentary elections 1998 proved the importance of independent, objective, and professional public opinion polling as an essential element of a democracy and civil society. Even though professionally conducted surveys of voting preferences are not identical to forecasting the future, they represent the most objective source of information about the extent of support enjoyed by political parties at a given moment.

FROM ENTHUSIASMUS TO PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

In 1999 the professional association SAVA (Slovak Association of Research Agencies) was established and registered. By the end of 1999 ten research agencies working in the sphere of public opinion polls, social and marketing research were full members of this association. SAVA set standard criteria for professional work in all parts of the research work and to control how the agencies meet them. It applied also for the membership in the most established and prestige association of this type ESOMAR which associates 100 national professional organizations.

The market of political and social information in Slovakia is turning step by step to the sphere comparable with that in established democracies. Of course, it is still facing many partial problems (as for example communication with media, ensuring high professional criteria etc.) but after ten years it is established part of public environment.

HOT ISSUES

Let me conclude by listing some methodological problems and hot issues political polling in Slovakia is facing:

- limits of representativeness of telephone interviewing – limits in flexibility of face-to-face interviewing
- random vs. quota sampling
- increasing refusal rate, willingness of general population and elite to respond the surveys
- how can the polls “create” a party?

- not stabilized political scene – differences between “legal” and “political” reality
- who are and who should be the clients of political surveys?

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