

# **COMMUNICATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF SLOVAKIA**

Structural and Content Analysis of Communication  
of the Government of Slovakia

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Bajkalská 25, 827 18 Bratislava 212

tel.: 02/53 411 020, fax: 02/58 233 487

[www.governance.sk](http://www.governance.sk)

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# **COMMUNICATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF SLOVAKIA**

Structural and Content Analysis of Communication  
of the Government of Slovakia

*Words May Help a People Understand Action,  
But They Are No Substitute For Policy*

**Report prepared under UNDP RBEC sub-regional project  
RER/01/003/A08/13 Improving Communications from Governments  
to Societies in Central Europe and the Baltic States**

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**FOREWORD**

I would like to thank to UNDP representatives in Slovakia, namely *Tomasz Anusiewicz* and *Lykke Andersen* for enabling me to carry out this - from a professional point of view - very fascinating research.

Thanks to *Mária Ondruchová*, the Head of the Department of Planning and Analysis of the Office of the Government, who suggested my name to carry out this research and provided useful insights and recommendations.

This project would not have been possible without financial support of the Canadian Embassy in Prague and its Office in Bratislava.

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The help of all above-mentioned as well as those who agreed to offer background information is highly appreciated.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **THE PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY**

This report presents findings, analytical conclusions and some recommendations for phase 1 of an international project designed to assist the improvement of communications from governments to societies in central and eastern Europe and the Baltic states. This research reflects experiences in this area from Slovakia.

The empirical findings are based on intensive interviews with mid- and low-level civil servants, mostly press secretaries at ministries, editors of print and electronic media, journalists, other professionals, international observers and a number of common citizens. Available opinion polls and a few press and academic articles were utilized too.

### **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Public trust in the government and the Prime Minister is very low but comparable to trust levels in other post communist countries, for example Latvia. The most devastating blow to the image of the first government of Mikuláš Dzurinda - besides obvious failures in some crucial policies like employment - **was a lack of coordination of communication at horizontal and vertical levels combined with counter-productive attacks in the media by representatives and parliamentarians of various coalition parties.**

This politically suicidal behaviour reflected the very broad, some say “rainbow”, coalition form of the government and preference given to individual party interests over common interests. It contributed to low trust in politics in general with eighty percent of Slovak citizens believing that politicians and public figures prefer their own personal interests before public interests.

This criticism was mainly related to members of the cabinet and the parliament. In addition, there was, in most cases, **the inability, or rather the missing interest of the government to communicate controversial or sensitive policies in clear terms in proper time to the public through the media.** As a result, public discourse was heavily politicised. Fact-based discussions by professionals were usually of minor importance even in cases where professional advice was needed more than political decision.

The size, speed and quality of services offered by press, information or communication departments differs. It is possible to identify better or worse functioning press/communication departments. Differences in quality of provided services and in their size and speed seem primarily related to the human factor, which can probably be better explained by selection criteria used and self-motivation than by other factors like financial motivation – salaries are usually very similar. Ideally, it seems to combine the enthusiasm of younger civil servants with the experiences of older civil servants.

In spite of the challenges, there seems to be an ongoing but relatively slow process of

professionalisation in governmental communication, a process of learning by doing.

The media naturally seek scandals and conflicts. In this respect, the public media should clearly have different priorities - to the highest degree possible.

### **STRATEGIC ISSUES**

A coalition government and some personal political ambitions result in presenting political controversies in the media. Scarce human resources (or possibly not efficiently utilized resources in other departments) in the Government Office as well as in other ministries, challenge efforts to change this highly fragile and overall poorly functioning communication environment.

In general, I would suggest “the golden rule” for any government in any area, including successful communication. This Golden Rule should be as follows: create clear and binding rules of the game, select proper professionals, create the right incentives for them, give them clear orders and instructions in time and let them work.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

*The government should consider:*

- 1. The need to generate a desire for a common communications approach among members of a coalition government (including MPs).**
- 2. The need for a communications coordinating policy and structure in the government.**
- 3. The need for better planning around communications issues both within individual departments and among departments.**
- 4. The need to establish a more professional approach to media relations.**
- 5. The need for professional development among journalists in the public media and government communications officials.**

**The public media should consider:**

- 1. The need to focus on news items that may be less attractive but with potentially significant impact on citizens’ life.** Perhaps increasing specialization among journalists would work in this way.

2. The need to focus on the discussion of issues and topics **not only “of the day” but also those with potentially long-term significant impact** on citizens’ life.
3. The need to **strengthen and make more comprehensive discussions** of issues and topics with politicians, experts and citizens.
4. The need to find ways **of empowering citizens with know-how in solving problems of their interest.**
5. The need **to rotate regularly journalists between Bratislava and regional centres.** This would build better awareness of regional and local issues that are indeed different from Bratislava.
6. The need to enable for **young journalists short-stay experience in foreign public televisions and radio stations.**

## INTRODUCTION

*For the past two centuries, it was law that provided the source of authority for democracy. Today, law seems to be replaced by opinion as the source of authority and the media serve at the arbiters of public opinion.*

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former secretary-general of the United Nations, 1995

In the early 1990s, freedom of the media was understood as the right to publish anything. As a result, many unsubstantiated issues were published and many personal opinions were presented as facts. The media proved little resistant to populist calls. On the side of politicians, a majority of the new generation of post-communist politicians did not understand how media operate in a democracy (some still do not understand).

Various media conspiracy theories emerged. On top of that, many politicians deliberately explained current issues to citizens in a way that did not help understanding. On the contrary, this kind of discourse led to almost pathological polarization of society.

Only founding of new political parties - Smer in late 1999 and ANO in 2001 signalled a break in this extreme polarization. Research shows that these two parties are able to attract voters from across the Slovak political spectrum. This had not been the case until then. Rather, voters changed their preferences in the framework of two separate politico-ideological camps.

Before that, and still to some degree today, politics and political issues have been heavily personalized. As a result, citizens did not perceive economic and social decline as the inability of political and business leaders to solve problems related to transformation - regardless whether it was for objective or subjective reasons, but almost exclusively through the mechanism of searching for internal and external enemies.

Thus, a number of real and artificial crises and scandals were present, in itself a new phenomenon after four decades of relatively static politics. Politicians, the media and citizens paid attention to scandals and not to decisions and their possible consequences.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s politicians and journalists still deformed public opinion by inventing artificial issues and topics. Public discourse was heavily politicised even in cases where professionals and not politicians had to have more say. There was enough political information but not enough facts or rational discussion about important issues.

Clearly, the low ability of the media (whether for objective or subjective reasons, and regardless of fact that it was similar to almost all other professional areas in humanities) during the crucial period of transformation in presenting standard political and professional discourse as well as ethical norms led to a cognitive impotence of citizens during the Slovak transition.

In addition, many pseudo-intellectuals and pseudo-experts were able to enter into the public arena. This did not help people's understanding of what was really happening. Finally,



investigative journalism, the last hope for democracy in a moral crisis, turned mostly into tool for political struggle among the political and/or business elite.

In the late 1990s, most of the most important media came under the control of powerful business lobbies connected, inevitably, with politics. Some journalists willingly cooperate with media owners or politicians and, in the case of Pavol Rusko before 2002 parliamentary elections, one person is both a politician – as head of the non-parliamentary Ano party, and the owner of private TV Markíza.

Although foreign media owners seem to be more balanced in their level of politicisation, these owners are neither immune to attempts to cooperate with politicians nor do they forget to take into account the possible political impact on their business activities of their criticism of political parties in power.

This state of affairs is complicated by what some call a “non-standard media scene”. In short, there is no clear left-right spectrum of daily newspapers. Some might argue that this is a general trend in post-industrial or post-modern society, or, at least, post-communist society, but be that as it may, this journalism presents political and business interests, or, at minimum, carries out politicised discussions of most issues.

Both legislative changes like the Freedom of Information Act and personnel changes after the 1998 parliamentary elections signalled some positive trends with respect to professionalisation of communication between the media and the population at large. Members of government as well as civil servants became in many cases more responsive to media requests, especially as far as more prestigious media are concerned.

This, however, sometimes resulted in clear and unfair preferences for prestigious media. For example, in the summer 2001, the Prime Minister gave preferential treatment to TV Markíza without any earlier explanation or apology. This behaviour was seen as unfair by other media. As a result, the editors in chief of some major media complained both in the press and in person to the Prime Minister.

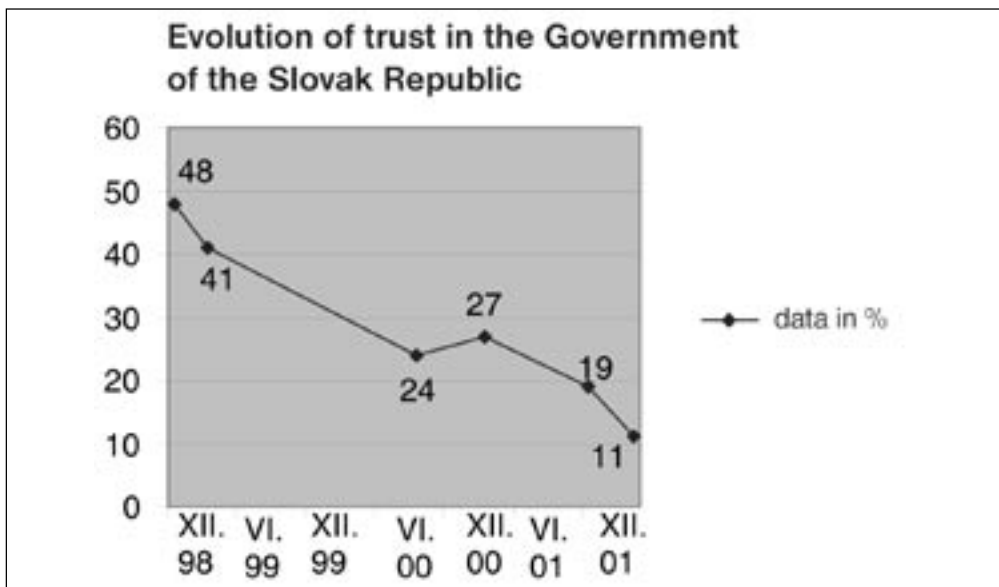
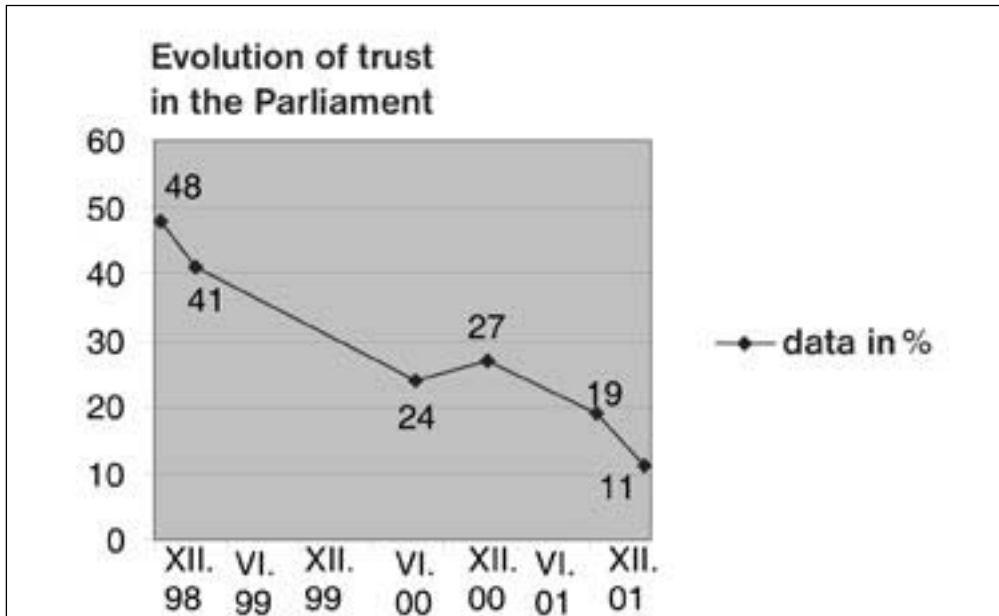
***The most devastating blow to the image of the Government of Mikuláš Dzurinda - besides obvious failure in performance of some crucial policies like employment - was a lack of coordination of communication at all levels and counter-productive attacks in the media by representatives of various coalition parties and members of the Parliament from coalition parties. In addition, there was in most cases inability of the Government to communicate controversial or sensitive policies in clear terms in proper time to the public through the media.***

In March 1999, 50 per cent of Slovaks polled expressed trust in government, while at the same time 47 % expressed distrust (Názory, No.1, 1999, p.4-6). Although we can see that there was relatively low trust in the government already at the beginning of its mandate in October 1998, it was half of that level (22.7 %) in late November 2001.

Public trust in the President was 36.4 %, while at the same time, trust in the National Council (Parliament) was only 19.2 %. Among the three most trusted institutions (if we do not count the

media, which in some other opinion polls had considerably high trust) were the Army (57.2 %), the Church (54.6 %) and authorities of self-government (47.1 %) (Národná obroda, 15 March 2002, p.5).

Parliament was also the institution with the lowest trust. As many as 77 % of respondents reported not having trust in this representative body. It was followed by the Government (74.9 %)



and the President (61.3 % distrust).

At least some members of the Government understood why there was such low trust in the Government throughout its whole term. As put by former Minister of Finance Brigita

Schmögnerová (Národná obroda, 1 February 2002, p.4): “The cause for low preferences (in opinion polls) is our inability to explain in proper manner to the citizens [why some unpopular measures were necessary].” Although it is clear that policies with direct negative consequences can hardly be accepted with happiness, some understanding why these measures are necessary could have been achieved by targeted communication. Clearly, the extremely low turnout in the first regional elections in Slovakia in late 2001 could be explained largely by the same arguments. Even national holidays are usually promoted either in a very old-fashioned way or in a very formal way, recalling the communist past. This is in sharp contrast with, for example, the almost obsessive behaviour of former Hungarian premier Viktor Orbán’s government with various grandiose Hollywood- or Disney-style celebrations.

Initially, new young civil servants at the ministries did not have enough experience or patience with the media in general, although some came from the media. Many departments with former journalists who “changed sides” thus reflect the quality of Slovak journalism itself. It should be mentioned that many journalists did not study journalism or communication, and some do not have even university education. This may not be a negative evaluation if one considers the overall low, or rather old-fashioned quality of humanities education at Slovak universities. However, it can become problem - as it is in Slovakia - when there is no system of patronage for older, not necessarily senior editors, over newcomers into the profession.

The communication of state authorities with the media benefits more from the social networks of these journalists than from their often too short experience in the media. A salient feature of government communication is slow but in most cases the clear professionalisation of press departments. This professionalisation was influenced both by technological changes, especially by introduction of e-mail and Internet, as well as by the “learning by doing” process of press and information departments.

In addition, significant numbers of young journalists have moved to jobs in press departments since 1998 parliamentary elections, and to PR agencies throughout the last decade. This trend from late 1990s was facilitated by trend from early 1990s, when for political reasons some members of the older generation of media professionals were forced to leave the job, especially in television. For these reasons, but also because of a boom in the media market, there is large number of young journalists in the media.

While there are signs of professionalisation in PR and press departments, journalism faces more challenges than ever. The journalists often do not provide background, do not research enough, do not press politicians enough, and do not understand broader issues.

Some politicians are more critical about the quality of Slovak journalism in general. For example, the Minister of Justice argues that Slovak journalists are much less prepared for interviews than their Czech counterparts. (Slovo, No.5, p.5, 2002).

Probably the first academic research about the state of political communication in Slovakia was done in 1998/1999 (Holina and Školkay 2000). This research suggested that fair, open and direct personal communication is the most suitable.

This does not mean to say everything one knows. On the one hand it is better to keep some personal distance, but on the other hand this prevents better communication. This study, carried out over a long-term period between 1998 and 1999 showed that the government dominated news in selected print media (about half of all sources), it had major share in relative terms in main radio news stations (one third in public radio and one half in private radio) and in television broadcast (the ratio was four to five in public television and four to three in private television).

The public figures dominated news reporting at that time in STV, TV Markíza and Slovak Radio due to their own initiative. This shows many wasted opportunities and future opportunities for politicians and civil servants, because government is traditionally the major source of news in many, if not all, developed countries. Indeed, monitoring ([www.rada-rtv.sk](http://www.rada-rtv.sk)) of news programs on STV and TV Markíza throughout June 2000 proved that the government or government-related news dominated broadcasts, with 39 and 37 per cent respectively.

The second place in news coverage belonged to coalition parties and MPs with almost equal time. Among politicians, the most often presented person was the Prime Minister, followed by the President (who was seriously ill at that time) and the vice-prime minister for economy. Both television stations presented their information mostly in neutral way.

**STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF INFORMATION FLOW BY  
THE STATE AUTHORITIES**

*But my only message today is the need for responsibility and accountability by the media, as they fulfil their indispensable roles as vigorous critics and faithful chronicles of our lives and out times, our great failings and our high achievements.*

*Brian Mulroney, former Prime Minister of Canada, 1995*

There is no document about the communication strategy of the Government. This is not new or surprising for most observers. Some media professionals offered to create communication strategy for the former government of Vladimír Mečiar, but this offer was declined. There was a prepared communication strategy for current Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, but even this was not carried out, with exception of some minor activities.

There have been some governmental communication strategies towards the public, related to EU and NATO integration, government's anti-corruption campaign, against non-bank subjects operating 'pyramid schemes' in 2000, and improving tolerance towards minorities, funded by Phare in 1999.

However, the campaign in favour of NATO integration seemed to be initially rather naive. There were also various campaigns in the electronic, print and outdoor media against racism supported by the Government in late 2001 and early 2002.

Another media campaign funded by the Government started in February 2002. Its focus is at promotion of Slovak products on the domestic market. This low-budget campaign should last at least three years.

While there can be some relationship between the governmental campaign in favour of NATO and the slow but steady increase in support for joining NATO, other campaigns have met with considerably less success.

The campaign Don't Hazard with Your Savings, which warned about non-banking institutions offering unrealistically high investment returns, was carried out under Phare's Public Awareness program in 2000. This project cost 100,000 euros, yet only 13 % of this amount was used for actual advertisements in the media. The collapse of non-banking financial institutions in early 2002 was another blow to the image of the government and its communication strategy.

Perhaps more importantly, there was no campaign to explain why some social reforms are necessary. Neither was the need to increase energy prices explained to the citizens adequately. Practical information on how to find jobs at home or abroad, how to become self-employed, etc, have never been discussed in a structured way on public television or public radio.

The government had not expected all the challenges it has faced and was absolutely unprepared to react to them in time. This relates to structural weaknesses in the current Slovak political system - too many, and thus too small political parties. Consequently, these parties are not

able to create realistic programmes that would be applicable in policy. Political parties are lacking experts and, once they come into government, they face demands from other parties.

The search for consensus took long time. Meanwhile, these issues usually became “medialised”. But political struggles covered the substance of issues discussed. For example, there was almost a year-long political discussion about competencies and structure of newly-devolved regional self-governments. At the end, people still didn’t understand what regional self-government was for and, as a result, did take regional elections seriously. In addition, opinion polls suggest that supporters of coalition parties did not trust leaders of other coalition parties. This is again specific feature of the current Slovak political system.

One of the attempts of the current government to systematically improve its communication with the citizens was done in the framework of the audit of state authorities in 2000-2001. Recommendations related to communications with citizens created marginal part of all recommendations. It was suggested the state create specialized departments for external relations. These departments were supposed to integrate press departments and public relations departments, ideally, in the Office of the Minister. Further, these joined departments were supposed to be expanded with additional professionals. All correspondence from citizens would ideally go first through these departments, and, respectively, through sub departments dealing with correspondence from citizens exclusively. In retrospect, this was a helpful suggestion, and is now functioning, at least at some ministries.

It seems that there was no special or regular Cabinet meeting on communication policy whatsoever. A few ministries have developed detailed communication plans - e.g. Ministry of Construction and Regional Development – while some, like the Ministry of Justice attempt to communicate clear messages each year without written ‘communication strategies’ present. Some others, like the Ministry of Finance, have outdated or improvised communication strategies.

All state authorities have press spokespersons and/or press departments. This was not the case till the mid 1990s. Larger and more important ministries usually have separate spokespersons for the ministry and for the minister. But again, there is exception here – at the Ministry of Finance, there is one spokesperson for both Ministry and Minister. In this case, this state of affairs is not caused by lack of qualified staff.

In spite of this somewhat negative example, there is growing awareness that political and professional issues should be clearly divided. The former is to be communicated by the Minister or his spokesperson; the latter is to be communicated by a Press/Information Department.

The size, speed and quality of services offered by press/information or communication departments differs, and it is possible to identify better or worse functioning press/communication departments. For example, one monitoring program showed that the ‘most friendly’ departments are at the Ministry of Finance, the Office of the Government, the Anti-Monopoly Office and the Ministry of Defence. The ‘least cooperative with information’ are at the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Transport, Post and Telecommunications, as well as the Ministry of Health, and the

Ministry of Justice (Národná obroda, 8 March 2002, p.2).

But it is not clear on what basis this research was done. Some journalists, for example, prize the Ministry of Justice as information-friendly.

Differences in quality of provided services and in their size and speed seem primarily to be related to the human factor. In other words, it depends on who is in charge of the ministry and the press/communication department. Sometimes, however, political affiliation of a given ministry seems to play role.

In this respect, many journalists were critical of about half of the ministries lead by the Party of Democratic Left (SDL). Two exceptions seem to be the Ministry of Defence and the former Minister of Finance, but the latter Minister was, some argue, “eager to discuss till you agreed with her.” However, this opinion may reflect the more right-wing orientation of journalists.

By and large, it seems that communication problems of SDL were caused first of all by its internal problems, as became very clear in early 2002. For this reason, not only journalists but also many civil servants and press spokespersons blamed representatives of the SDL for often totally different opinions present than is the overall policy of the Government. This is seen as seriously harmful to the image of the Government.

In perhaps all cases, Press/Information Departments regularly monitor daily and specialised weekly press, and/or use private electronic monitoring databases like STORIN or TRIAS for information and commentaries related to their professional interests. This information is distributed to senior civil servants. In some, if not most cases, this information probably causes information overload, because the information is usually not properly structured, nor are important sentences or details highlighted.

There are various strategies for evaluation of images and communication of various ministries. For example, some Press/Information Departments prepare regular reports about positive and negative news in the media once every three months; some other ministries have changed the frequency of these summary and sometimes more analytical reports to twice a week. There are regular meetings, usually with representatives of Press/Information Department, head of the Office of Minister and spokespersons of Minister and Ministry. These meetings are held in most cases at least once a week.

In some important cases there is no demand for regular or even occasional feedback. For example, the regular Hour of Questions for members of the Cabinet and Prime Minister in parliament has never been analysed from this point of view by the Government Office or the Office of the Prime Minister. In other words, no one has ever requested analysis of the professionalism of form (rhetoric, language, etc.) and content (argumentation style, reaction to additional questions, etc) of this communication. This should be done by external professionals, from universities and the Academy of Sciences.

The media, especially the daily press, serve as a ‘free of charge’ training centre for other

media, public relations and press departments. Significant numbers of journalists have moved to jobs in press departments since the 1998 parliamentary elections, and to PR agencies throughout the last decade.

Yet it seems that these human resources are not used efficiently, if at all. Sometimes ministers bring with them only small group of advisors and press secretaries and do not consider what else is available. Even worse, sometimes these press secretaries and spokespersons are not qualified at all, but are friends of the political parties.

Especially in the first year or two of the new government, there were in many cases no journalist-specialists, for example those who covered extensively issues related to the Ministry of Justice. For this reason, many journalists did not understand deeper details of issues they were writing about. In some cases, brief information workshops for journalists organized by press departments were necessary. But this is still true in cases of less important - meaning less attractive for the media - ministries. For example, the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Transport complains that journalists are still poorly prepared for press conferences organized by this ministry.

If there are communication problems, these seem to be first of all related to a lack of interest by journalists in detailed explanation of issues offered by press departments. For this reason, some ministries, like the Ministry of Finance, organize quasi-informal meetings with selected journalists. Particularly younger journalists do not understand professional terminology of senior civil servants. This “bureaucratic language” should be “translated” into more digestible language by younger civil servants and press/communications officers.

There are neither regular official nor unofficial contacts among various press departments, and no organized regular, or even occasional workshops for them.

## **ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION**

Almost all key topics and materials to be discussed in cabinet sessions, as well as ministerial documents are in most cases presented on governmental web pages in advance. This is highly appreciated by most journalists, although the quality obviously differs greatly. E-mail communication is widely used by most press departments for communication with selected journalists. In addition, the Government Office uses an SMS database with over 100 hundred contacts for flash news to journalists.

The first important Internet project in providing information to citizens was the business register on the Internet, which started on January 1, 2001. This source of information has become quite popular. A collection of laws was later put on the Internet.

The Freedom of Information Law forced state authorities to publish information, especially on Internet. Often, however, information is offered in chronological order only, with difficult access. This approach could be seen, at least initially, at web pages of ministries of interior, culture, education, industry, as well as the parliament. Very little information was provided by the



Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Finance.

The web page of the Office of the President does not provide information required by the law, and there have been suspicions that negative comments by citizens are deliberately deleted.

High quality information on the Internet is offered by the Government Office. This web page is well structured and includes audio information as well. Better than average web pages are provided by webmasters at the ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture and Transport, Post and Telecommunications.

There is, however, no information connectivity among all governmental sources. Each server has its own structure and layout, often very low quality (Bella and Ďurkovič 2001, 685-686). Sometimes it happens that not enough attention is being paid to how web pages actually function, as was the case for two weeks with the parliament's web site (see *Hospodárske noviny*, 3 January 2002, p.2).

Prime Minister Dzurinda has used the Internet four times for on-line discussion with citizens too. He was actually the first Slovak politician to use online discussion with citizens on 25 June 1999.

### **INFORMAL COMMUNICATION**

There are still some informal breakfasts or dinners with selected journalists by some ministers and by the Prime Minister. However, in some cases these informal meetings have been cancelled for lack of time.

The Prime Minister and some politicians take seriously informal opportunities to meet with journalists. For example, there is a regular soccer tournament between journalists and politicians (see Sme, 26 November 2001, p.5). Opportunities for informal communication are also available during air-trips abroad, onboard the airplane.

One should perhaps differentiate here between informal communication and off-the-record communication. The image of former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar suffered heavily due to his informal communication with the public. As wrote Beblavý and Salner (1999, 25), most foreign correspondents paid much more attention to informal (of a sort) meetings of Vladimír Mečiar with the public. This was because it was difficult to reach him in other ways.

In any case, his radical and sometimes vulgar expressions at these meetings damaged his reputation more than any formal interview. In some cases, this is what has happened to the image of Mikuláš Dzurinda during his informal but not off-the-record encounters with journalists.

On one had, some civil servants do not like what they perceive as informal communication flow from ministries and other state authorities. Journalists, for various but understandable reasons, attempt to contact senior and junior civil servants at ministries, usually heads of departments. Journalists try to get feedback on new initiatives - drafts of laws or policies. Not only differing professional opinions but also political decisions come into conflict here.

On the other hand, the Office of Analysis and Planning at the Government Office faces

problems in communication with some ministries - again, in two cases ministers are from the SDL). The program for Cabinet meetings is shaped just a day or two before the meeting. Nevertheless, comments and opinions from ministries seem to be necessary, yet there are often no Responses, in approximately a quarter of cases, or formal reactions, in half of the cases when someone had sent something. Not all ministries were asked for cooperation.

Some experienced civil servants claim that, indeed, the media select topics discussed in committees of the Parliament according to “media attractiveness”, not according to their possible impact on society. Even if there are journalists present, not always the most important point is presented in the media.

**COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION OF THE OFFICE OF  
THE GOVERNMENT**

*If journalists are continually publicizing blunders, conflicts and scandals, and rarely (if ever) publicizing innovations, achievements or outstanding performances, it is not surprising that a self-fulfilling prophecy has taken place: The public has little trust in government.*

*Margaret T. Gordon, professor at the Graduate School of Public  
Affairs of the University of Washington, 1995*

In the Government Office there is the Chancellery Office of the Prime Minister as well as the Information Service for the Public, which is directly under the control of the head of the Government Office. Then there are the more independent Press and Information Department and the Department of Petitions and Complaints. While these offices serve all bodies related to the government proper, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister serves only the P.M. and consists of the Department for Public Relations, the Department of Planning and Analysis and the Board of Advisors.

There are **press secretaries** for the prime minister, and one for each of vice-prime minister.

In practice, although the Press and Information Department is in the Office of the Government, it serves primarily the Prime Minister and vice-prime ministers. The Press and Information Department reviews all documents aimed at the media or public, but this is mostly from the point of linguistics. There seems to be too many policy issues for management from this office.

This department presents to the media Cabinet activities as a single unit. Press officers complain that approximately every third task is challenged by failure or slow communication with other departments inside or outside the Government Office.

The flexibility of the PM's program causes at least some improvisation.

The fastest and most effective forms of communication with the media are via phone, e-mail, fax and web site. There is always a press secretary on duty. An extensive database of mobile phone numbers (about 100 contacts) makes flash news a reality in a few seconds, without the need to rely on a news wire or press agency. National media do not take information offered as it is, but take it as news, while regional media usually take information without any changes or comments.

The **Department of Analysis and Planning** in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister prepares topics for communication of the Prime Minister. These topics are discussed at a meeting with Press Department representatives and the head of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. Sometimes there are more limited special meetings. In this case, the spokesperson of the Prime Minister and an advisor to the Prime Minister are present.

This office was established under the current government. Before that there was no overlapping communication structure.

The Department of Analysis and Planning:

- a) defines communication priorities of the Prime Minister,
- b) outlines contents of his speeches and declarations. Previously, the Prime Minister spoke about what he remembered from the session of the Cabinet),
- c) provides background and analytical information for the P.M.,
- d) shapes his presentation in the public, including his official web page.

Challenges: In spite of above structure (or because of it), there are persistent challenges. ***No one pays systematic attention to dissemination of information about common efforts of the Government.*** Attempts to communicate only one or two issue to the public have failed due to the low quality of information submitted by ministries and individual, often contradictory, communication activities of the members of government.

There was an attempt to coordinate communication. A meeting of advisors to the P.M. and spokespersons of ministries was organized for this purpose in an earlier period of the Dzurinda government. However, this attempt failed due to the conflicting interests of various political parties that make up the government coalition. It has been a more common strategy to present interests of individual political parties than that of the Government. Sometimes ministers did not speak at closed parliamentary sessions, but did not mind speaking up critically in front of the media.

In an international setting, the government, and especially Cabinet, should consider the importance of its representation abroad through high quality experts and civil servants. In some cases, the same people represent the government in various positions, while in others, there is no representation whatever. The government should not underestimate the importance of its image on mid- and lower-level representatives and at international meetings. Foreign trips require careful planning and preparation, and this relates to the selection of the proper people with a basic knowledge of public presentations.

Some international observers argue that there are, in fact, two sides of Slovakia: one very modern, and one very traditional which should be translated as highly unprofessional.

International observers have experienced some difficulties in communication with the Government. Sometimes, it takes a long time to get a response, sometimes it is not clear who has the authority to deal with a request, and at times the same person representing the Government in one area appears as representing an NGO in another area. This certainly does contribute to distrust, or at the minimum, to confusion.

In short, it is too often difficult and challenging for the international public to expect some services or communication from very busy and non-coordinated people in the Government, who have little decision-making rights, as well as from other sectors of society.

Former press officers claim that in most cases when the media reported a coming collapse of the current government, it was exaggerated news. In fact, when there was a real crisis, media often did not notice this. This is difficult to prove without hindsight, but in any case, the typical reaction of politicians and civil servants seemed to be blaming journalists for problems and slow

decision-making – for example the hesitant dismissal of ministers or civil servants suspected of serious corruption.

Former press officers believe that it is important to take action against possible abusers of power very quickly. It is too late, and very counterproductive, when partial information leaks to the media.

But it is certainly true that the views of the influential critical weekly Domino fórum have turned socially conservative and economically libertarian. In fact, the editor in chief has turned into a hidden politician. In this way, the paper affects the opinions of many influential people about what is and what should be role of the state, when compromise is necessary on given issues and when one should pursue his or her policies.

**COMMUNICATION OF THE GOVERNMENT AS SEEN BY MEDIA  
PROFESSIONALS**

*In today's geographically dispersed and increasingly inward-looking society, only journalism can provide the shared information and the place for discussing it that are essential to the democratic process.*

*Davis Merritt, editor and author, 1995*

In general, communication of various state authorities is seen as formal. It is strongly influenced by the human factor - in other words, it is important who is in charge of a given ministry and especially of the press and information department. This makes general evaluation difficult.

Some argue that the quality of communication of the current government is the same as it was under the previous government. Others argue that it has greatly improved, at least in the Office of the Government. A senior editor has argued that about half the members of any government so far were unable to communicate effectively with the media and the public.

Clearly, journalists are able to identify some ministries and other authorities as more professional, more helpful or vice versa. Initially, some politicians and ministries, including the Prime Minister, were interested in the opinions of journalists. Various departments have, in most cases, a friendly approach to the media. With some, however, the ministry can be difficult to reach and there are problems both in access to the employees and information. Journalists prefer politicians who are not afraid of hard questions and give reasonably honest answers.

The Freedom of Information Act has not made much difference for the media, although it was certainly positive step towards information freedom. If nothing else, it creates pressure on civil servants to be more inclined to offer information to the media.

But it has been a positive step in the professionalisation of press departments, since all requests by citizens go to specialised units or persons, thus there is more time for specific tasks and for the media in general.

Journalists complain that in some cases it is still difficult to get some sensitive information from state authorities. Some ministries, like the Ministry of Finance, have clear policies about what can be communicated via the Internet and what cannot. Personal contacts and relationships at all levels still play a very important role in Slovakia, especially in the regions.

Sometimes leaks to the media are caused by civil servants. More prestigious media are especially targets for leaks by isolated civil servants, as well as for hidden public relations campaigns organized by political parties or, increasingly, by powerful business groups.

The more prestigious media, like the Pravda daily are more inclined to pursue some issues for a longer time. In contrast to the previous government lead by Vladimír Mečiar, media pressure leads

in some significant cases - also due to the higher sensitivity of the current government to media pressure - to a stronger impact on politics.

In other words, some top politicians, including ministers, have resigned due to media pressure in the last three years. These former members of government, as well as leaders of political parties often failed to recognize this tendency in media politics. However, voluntary resignation or dismissal of ministers by the Prime Minister came, in most cases, too late. This, obviously, has been more than a little unhelpful for the image of the Government.

The media, and the public, see the hesitation of many politicians to answer sensitive or perhaps personal questions. There is an interesting contrast seen by some journalists - while the current opposition in the Parliament often does not want or does not know how to comment on some issues, MPs in general often say more than is necessary.

Although Slovak political discourse is not unique in its occasional tendency towards primitivism, top politicians particularly are under close supervision by the media and citizens. Neither citizens as a whole nor most media tolerate extreme, vulgar or rude statements by top politicians. Although some voters like or tolerate this kind of speech, most voters seem to show a low tolerance towards primitivism.

The media know that they are under permanent informal, and in some cases formal and official supervision by both governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as by some independent activists. Often, if some controversial commentary appears, this is good reason for phone calls or written response. It is puzzling for journalists and counterproductive for politicians when top representatives of the state demand corrections in cases when there really is no qualified reason for correction.

In most cases, requests of politicians for corrections are the result of their mistakes in communication. Many Slovak politicians still do not understand how the media operate. Politicians know only that the media are important. It seems that only those politicians who lived abroad understand well both how media are important and how they operate.

In general, politicians do not understand that media often use only 10 seconds of their 10-minute speech. This is not the result of a negative personal attitude of journalists towards a politician, but rather the result of technological and time or space limitations of the media as well as psychological limitations of a listener. It is difficult to give five or ten minutes to a single politician in news coverage on radio or television when the total news time slot is 20 minutes, and it is easy for a reader to ignore long speeches in print media. Virtually nobody has time or interest to listen to news for two hours or more each day.

If a journalist selects some part of speech by a politician, then it is often not the most important one, but “sound bites”. In other words, a sentence or a few words which are, for some reason, seen as attractive, unusual, original or simply short. Further, as put by editor Anna Sámelová, “journalism is not about searching for truth but for facts.”

Campbell (1999, XIV) argues much the same thing: “Journalism is in the problem-solving business, not the truth business.”

Then, clearly, dissatisfaction of politicians and citizens with journalists and media in general, is more understandable, but it is also easier to cure. What is needed are facts delivered as soon as possible, and in the quality and quantity needed. Only then can journalists construct stories that would satisfy those politicians who want to inform the public truly.

Politicians should also understand that the media have diverse expectations that result from their technology and their deadlines. For example, there are two extensive radio news programmes broadcast at noon – the same time when the Cabinet is usually still discussing policies. It would be useful if press department would take this into consideration and offer some information about what had already been approved in the session. Ironically, individual politicians seem to be aware of various deadlines in the media.

It is counterproductive when politicians themselves request corrections from an editor or media owner arguing that: “the facts are correct but the political decision was different.” It was not smart when Prime Minister Dzurinda criticised in May 2002 “unethical and unfair” reporting by the media, because he felt that the media had been ignoring his important meetings with foreign leaders and had exaggerated the government’s failures.

There is hidden pressure on the media, which is very effective in private TV Markíza, as well as in some print media and is probably effective to some degree in the public media, especially in television.

There is a general agreement that top politicians and statesmen present themselves too often in the media. This is probably in line with Slovak political culture, which expects that superiors are always the best in any area and do not make mistakes. Internal as well as external criticism and initiative are, in most cases, not welcome. People usually show solidarity with those weaker and suffering, regardless of whether it was just or fair punishment or not. Slovaks in lower ministerial positions are usually shy and calm when facing a wider international public, which hardly attracts great attention.

However, this old-fashioned version of communication, and the behaviour of the general population should be changed. Instead of ministers, press departments, in cooperation with trained heads of other departments, should be more active, offering full and detailed information in advance.

The present trend reflects the politicisation of information. Too many issues are presented as political issues, or have become politicised issues. Citizens and some journalists often rightly feel confused about public issues that are presented as factual, but often are politically motivated issues. Politicians should be able to express existing problems and issues clearly and in time. Politicians should also not pretend to be experts on everything. Sometimes this universal drive for expertise covers political struggles among coalition parties.

Senior journalists are often worried about exceedingly close relationships between some younger journalists and prominent, or less prominent, politicians. This relatively close friendliness potentially leads to mixing journalism with public relations, or to journalism that is only selectively critical. However, the younger generation seems also to be less respectful towards authorities.



Politicians try to establish close links with the journalists and some editorial offices, such as Slovak Radio, solve this problem by circulating journalists. This means that journalists do not report only about one party or politician, as was desire of President Schuster.

The interests of politicians in close relationships with journalists, together with, in most cases, the weak financial situation of the media, have in some cases resulted in the relatively easy access of the very rich and influential to the media. In this way, it is possible to secure the publishing or broadcast of almost any message in selected media - especially in private television - or at least to get enough space for a reply.

There are, of course, exceptions. Personal and business animosities of some publishers towards some politicians or businessmen are also reflected in the media. In this way, a plurality of information is present, but at the price of separate political discourses. Further, at least in one case the Prime Minister Dzurinda refused a discussion on public television with an opposition politician. This act proved to be counterproductive since many journalists saw this as cowardice.

In short, there are no clear “rules of the game” which regulate the relationships between journalists and politicians. This has become quite a common observation. For example, as a result of the situation mentioned above, STV adopted the Charter of News reporting. However, there is still no media policy pertaining to the government as a whole.

Information offered by Press Departments is often perceived to be superficial and too general. If there is specific request, it usually takes long time to get answer. Civil servants have a tendency to pass requests to other institutions.

Further, there is *no effective planning or coordination of planning of foreign trips with the media*. If journalists need visas, there is either a need for more time or help from state authorities to secure travel documents in time. While abroad, politicians do not take into account journalists’ needs for quick and brief information. In this respect, public radio and then news television TA-3 perhaps should be given priority.

Some journalists claim that not only foreign, but also domestic meetings and requests for interviews are often subject to change without proper notice. This suggests, perhaps unintentionally and unjustly, a picture of disorganization.

Similarly, communication of the government is not only communication itself but also the related services offered, and the politeness and helpfulness of mid-level civil servants.

Journalists outside Bratislava feel largely ignored by central authorities, but in principle their information needs are saturated by wire agencies. There is some animosity between journalists in Bratislava and in other cities.

Some foreign journalists but also diplomats feel that the Dzurinda government has been brutally criticised without fair appreciation for its successes. Dzurinda indeed seems, at least sometimes, to feel attacked by journalists asking questions. This attitude may partly reflect deep popular disillusionment after initially high hopes in society, which some have described as Slovak society’s deepest moral crisis in history. This can be seen in the low satisfaction rating in Slovakia

(50 %) with the way democracy was working in late 2001, in contrast with Poland - which was only slightly higher, Hungary and the Czech Republic (Klingemann 2001).

But the behaviour of the media certainly also reflects the need of the media for crisis or at least conflict. In this respect, perhaps the public media should change their news criteria. Raboy and Dagenais (1992, 3-4) argue that by labelling a given situation a 'crisis' or not, is itself an ideological and political act. Making these choices and structuring the way events are presented in the public sphere has become one of the essential functions of mass media.

In a certain sense, media thrive on 'crisis' and are threatened by normalcy. The media will tend to pay even more attention to a fabricated crisis than to one that can stake a material claim to reality. For social actors, provoking a crisis becomes a form of empowerment or social control, conclude Raboy and Dagenais.

In Slovakia, private TV Markíza, which by its nature as a profit-seeking private media and by the political ambitions of its co-owner and founder, who is also chair of the recently established non-parliamentary party ANO, actively looks for tensions and crises. Here perhaps the supervisory Council for Broadcast and Retransmission should take a more active role in monitoring hidden forms of manipulation and bias.

It is wrong for public television to try to compete with TV Markíza on equal terms. The recently adopted STV Charter of News reporting and Current Affairs claims, on the one hand that STV is in competition with commercial electronic media, on the other hand, it argues that the STV shall try to offer viewers the maximum of important and socially relevant information. In doing this, it is not enough to present an event, but there should also be added analysis. This is certainly a crucial point.

STV and Slovak Radio should select their own "public service" path (especially in news reporting) and follow it rigorously, regardless of what private TV Markíza or JOJ TV or private radios broadcast. In the television age, public media should create and maintain a discursive character of public communication. In the long run, public media and the public in general should benefit from it. If for no other reason, it would be a benefit because sources of information, ideas and commentary that can be perceived as *trustworthy* will remain indispensable, especially in an age of over-abundant information (McQuail 1995, 18).

But there are more important long-term consequences of media reporting. The most recent research (Wolling 2000) confirms that there is a significant relationship between negative political news reporting and negative evaluation of the legitimacy of the political system.

However, extremely negative news reporting does not have a direct impact on the understanding of a political system's legitimacy. On the one hand, although it is true that some media, especially the press, influence people's opinions, a far more important role in supporting a democratic political system is played by people's experience with the efficiency of the economy and politics. On the other hand, the more negatively political events are reported, the more people consider the information truthful. Further, the more uncritically that negative reporting is accepted, the more negatively the political system is evaluated by the general public.

Therefore, Wolling recommends that media should stress positive features of the democratic political system, for example the potential for peacefully solving political conflicts. The media should mention that their role is to criticise because it is vital for the survival of democracy, and at the same time criticism is a vital feature of democracy. This approach requires both citizens and politicians to understand how the media operate.

A US study on the relationship between media access and social and political trust (Moy and Scheufele 2000) suggests that reading newspapers and watching television entertainment enhances social trust, while watching television news undermined trust in others. The study also claims that political trust is not at all a function of the media, but rather, it stems from education and political ideology. Media access has a much more pronounced effect on social trust, but absence of social trust can lead to low political trust.

The authors conclude that the media are capable of promoting not only individual-level, short-term political behaviour, but also longer-term, aggregate-level attitudes and behaviour necessary for the healthy functioning of any democracy.

**COMMUNICATION OF THE GOVERNMENT AS SEEN BY CITIZENS**

*A public with information available to it is not an informed public...There is a difference between the “informational citizen,” saturated with bits and bytes of information, and the informed citizen, the person who has not only information but a point of view and preferences with which to make sense of it.*

*Michael Schudson, professor of communication, 1995*

Some media professionals argue that Slovak citizens show a tendency to identify journalists with their original sources of information. This may be true in many cases. More importantly perhaps, the older and mid-generation of citizens does not trust all information but often reads “between the lines”. It is also true that citizens are often naïve.

Empirical research indeed shows that the majority of Slovak citizens believe that the state is all-powerful, and that the state should take care of as many things as possible.

If there are problems, as far as political rhetoric is concerned, the citizens allegedly remember two key words: there is no money, and this event, information or politician is threatening to us. While not all citizens are that naïve, it is true that, especially older citizens mix together the President, the Parliament and the Government proper. Research suggests that about half of citizens show a tendency to understand these three branches as a single homogeneous body.

On one hand, citizens show a tendency to overlook bad sides of favoured politicians. On the other hand, citizens are more pessimistic about their own abilities to change their environment. But citizens clearly see that many politicians try to avoid answering direct questions, that some of them became rich while earning relatively low government salaries.

Citizens see that there is too much injustice and unfairness in politics and society. This is indeed a universal opinion: 80 % of Slovak citizens believe that politicians and public figures prefer their own personal interests before public interests. This criticism is mainly related to the members of the Cabinet and the parliament (Sme, 6 March 2002, p.2).

Another opinion poll in May 2002 evaluated the overall achievements and failures of the government in general and its policies in particular. The overall grade was between 3.7 and 4, where 1 was the maximum and 5 was the minimum. The worst achievements were seen in employment policies and in the fight against corruption. The best results were achieved in care about Hungarian minority and EU and NATO integration (Sme, 4 June 2002, p.5 and Pravda, 4 June 2002, p.2).

In general, citizens expect rational discussion about issues of their interest. These interests are first of all related to unemployment, health care, ethics in society, corruption and education. It is interesting to note that citizens did not perceive the current government as being worse than the Mečiar-led government of 1994-1998 in any of these areas (in Zubo 2002). But this tells us that these issues have been seen as critical and crucial for long time. Thus, unemployment, health care, standard of living and crime have been the most pressing problems for Slovaks during the period

January 1997 - January 2000 (Názory, No.3, 2000, p. 34).

Politicians should be aware that they are under permanent supervision by citizens, especially by opinion leaders in their communities or families. In order to engage citizens and various NGOs into politics, the Central Unit for the Fight Against Corruption at the Office of the Government suggested in early March 2002 to strengthen the role of the citizens in participating in legal changes. The citizens or non-governmental organizations should have the possibility to participate in law making. Although such possibilities already exist, they do not have the power of law, but only as a directive. The bill sets the rules for consulting laws with the public before passing them to parliament.

An initiative of some civil servants at the Ministry of Education was aimed in the opposite direction. This initiative from March 2002 should have limited the rights of citizens to ask state authorities about issues of their interest (Freedom of Information Act). This attempt to amend the Freedom of Information Act was stopped due to the protests of various NGOs.

The highest number of requests for information by citizens based on Freedom of Information is addressed to the Ministry of Finance. This Ministry had more than 1,200 requests for information in 2001, while the Office of the Government received more than 700 requests at the same time. Professionals working at these Departments argue that mainly older people are often positively surprised when they receive help, advice or information very quickly. About one third of requests came in the form of personal visits. Many of them also need personal communication.

Citizens are critical about the Prime Minister because they see that he repeats himself, he promised too many things but delivered too little, and when he promised something again, it was a half-year ago. An experienced sociologist suggested that populist promises made by PM Dzurinda before 1998 elections, for example doubling real salaries in four years, will not be forgotten by 95 % of population. The citizens are critical that the PM represents himself more often as chair of his SDKÚ party rather than as the PM.

Citizens highly appreciate the successes of the Government in international relations and appreciate specifically the PM for this achievement. In this regard, they for example noticed the PM's presentation of Slovakia on the Larry Kings Live program on CNN. However, some citizens feel that these visits abroad serve more to reassure the Government itself, or serve as substitution for the lack of success on the domestic front.

Citizens demand more clear positions of the Government with respect to fundamental issues and not just following foreign opinions. Yet citizens would expect to pay more attention to domestic issues and are not satisfied with the implicit or explicit message of the PM, which some of them read as "everything will be O.K."

Many citizens appreciate the PM's success in keeping together so ideologically and personally diverse a ruling coalition. Some have noticed, however, that power has had some impact on his rhetoric, if not behaviour.

Citizens are aware of the fact that communication of the Government does not exist as a single

unit. While there probably never was unity in the Government, in this period, before the coming elections, there is a natural tendency towards intensive party politics rather than towards united Government politics. Further, in the beginning of the present Government's term, too much time was spent criticising the previous Government.

Representatives of NGOs have also been critical about their communication and co-operation with the Government, although they appreciate the good will of the Government (in Turanský 2002).

Citizens have also noticed the low ability of the Government to manage crisis situations. Slovaks living abroad see activities of the government as "lots of words but not much action".

As far as direct communication between MPs and citizens is concerned, the daily Sme has carried out an interesting experiment. Reporters in the name of an anonymous citizen sent one question to 50 selected members of parliament, including one non-parliamentary politician. In three weeks, only 11 of them replied, with one undelivered email (Sme, 25 February 2002, p.19).

In short, citizens judge the credibility of government information on the basis of what they see and hear their political leaders saying in the media. They indicated a desire for honest, realistic commitments based on a credible explanation of the current situation in the country. They look to leaders to 'under-promise and over-deliver'.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Press, public and politics mutually constitute one another; they create spaces and roles in relation to one another, and when any of the parties opts of the symbiosis, it necessarily breaks up.*

James W. Carey, 1999, 53

*Die politische Kommunikation wird erfolgreich sein, wenn sie die Menschen beteiligt, anstatt ihnen etwas zu verkaufen.*

Michael Behrent, 2000, 86

Some people from press departments argue that the media are often not interested in substantial issues, i.e. in issues with long-term impact on citizens and the state, or issues with a short-term but heavy impact on citizens and the state. From the perspective of civil servants, the media too often prefer sensational, trivial or scandalous issues. This argument should not be surprising, since it is in line with general knowledge about how the media operate. As put by media scholar Denis McQuail (1995, 14): “Relevance is judged more by the media’s assessment of the average audience attention span than by any considered view of the interests of society. At the same time, the media concentrate on personalities and search for scandal, venality and wrongdoing.”

The journalists often argue the contrary: issues with a long-term impact on citizens and the state or with a short-term but heavy impact on citizens are difficult to reach via official ways.

It can be argued that some media, like daily tabloid *Nový čas*, TV *Markíza* or *Rádio Twist* offer digested and simplified information, while government officials and politicians present various contradicting opinions. There is too much politicised information, but not enough facts framed with explanation.

Communication of the Government of Slovakia should take into consideration some trends from abroad, namely the trend in governmental communication and media reporting, which focus less on the content of messages and more on the decision-making processes of Government and the causes of particular policy (Ruhstroth-Bauer 2000).

### THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD CONSIDER:

- 1. The need to generate a desire for a common communications approach among members of a coalition government (including MPs).**

Developing a strong, effective, well-organized and coordinated approach to government communications is one of the major governance challenges for modern democracies. It proved destructive, if not fatal for the image of the current Government to communicate contradictory issues and policies at the same time, combined with a low ability in crisis management and

a lack of communication strategy. Citizens and the media may not be all knowing or all remembering, but they can clearly see inconsistency and indeed, one statement contradictory to another by the Government. It appears that citizens, and perhaps less so the media, for the period until elections see the Government as a single body and not as ad hoc coalition of political parties and politicians. It would seem reasonable to see this act of common communication policy as the first political decision to be made before signing a coalition treaty. Certainly, it would be impossible to keep it permanently, but some rules should be observed.

## **2. The need for a communications coordinating policy and structure in the government.**

Pro-active communication strategy must be prepared and carried on by strongly motivated and well-trained press or communications officers. For this purpose, either the present Press and Information Department of the Office of the Government must take the lead, with or without additional human resources, or the Department of Information and Analysis of the Office of the Prime Minister must be restructured, or else another department for this purpose must be created. This central communication unit should be able to undertake three key areas of activity:

- Management, Planning and Coordination
- Media Relations and Analysis
- Communication Services

In order to ensure these goals, it must:

- develop an annual government-wide strategic communications plan.
- ensure broad understanding of the government plan and the integration of its key themes into the strategic communications plans of ministries.
- ensure that memoranda and proposals sent for the consideration of Cabinet include well thought out communication plans, in cooperation with Department of Planning and Analysis.
- oversee and coordinate the management of communications on crises and major issues.
- produce a weekly inventory of key announcements to ensure that they are well thought out and do not conflict with each other.
- act as “mother house” for the communications community within the government, This includes holding regular meetings for information sharing, up-dating on key government issues and priorities, presentation of major polling data, discussions of lessons learned and presentation of seminars on matters like electronic communications, media relations, communications planning and issues management.
- on-going monitoring, evaluation and adjustment of communication strategies.

This central communication office should prepare a blueprint for communication strategy of the Government for a particular year, which should be followed by communication strategies



of individual ministries. It would include:

- analyses of the current public environment and the factors that might affect the success or failure of communications objectives.
- communications objectives.
- major themes.
- key target audiences.
- a rollout plan for announcements and explanations of the Declaration of the Intended Activities of the Cabinet of Ministers.
- milestones for the launch of major initiatives over the course of the year that would call for horizontal communications coordination.

The central office should make more detailed communications strategies and then implement the strategies of the Government for each month. The Government Platform, the Plan of Legislative Tasks and the Declaration of the Intended Activities of the Cabinet of Ministers should create a basis for a government communication plan. All submissions to the Cabinet should include a communications plan, commenting on the public environment, likely impact of the proposal and how communications will be managed.

In addition, some general and more universal governmental communication rules -a Policy on Government Communications - should be produced. This should include basic principles, for example the non-partisan nature of communication, the need to demonstrate cost-effectiveness, as well as define roles and responsibilities and provide guidelines on the way the government communicates. For example, any correspondence by e-mail or fax, as well as phone messages, should be normally answered the same day, or within 24 hours, unless there are serious objections. Letters should be answered in a maximum of seven days, etc. It would also establish a coordination mechanism for activities like advertising and opinion research, and set out procurement procedures for communications products.

### **3. The need for better planning around communications issues both within individual departments and among departments.**

Close cooperation between press and communications departments of the Office of Government and some ministries should be seen as crucial in implementing a particular governmental strategy. The ministries should have their own communications plans, which at minimum should not be in contradiction with other government communications plans. These plans should be realistic, and regular meetings with other key departments or senior civil servants should check how communications strategy is being implemented and what are new issues or challenges to be dealt with. This should result in the flexible flow of information between ministries and the Office of the Prime Minister, independent of internal coalition struggles and personal or political animosities, in places where it does not currently work.

Since effective communications are an integral part to the implementation of virtually all initiatives, communications plans and budgets should be built into program proposals.

**4. The need to establish a more professional approach to media relations.**

The media should be seen like a fire: necessary and useful, but potentially volatile. From this point of view, openness, friendliness and helpfulness are key ingredients to success in communication with the media. Small mistakes of the media should be ignored or pointed out only in a way that does not offend the journalist. Criticism should be seen as a norm, and sometimes-assertive behaviour should be expected. For this purpose, individual experience with the media should be shared at regular meetings organized by the Press and Information Office of the Government. It seems reasonable to offer a brief lecture with basic knowledge about key rules on the preparation of speeches and presentations, as well as carrying out public talks for all civil servants who might possible lecture or prepare materials related to public appearances. The goals would be a reduction in the amount of useless politicised information, combined with increased explanation – meaning pro-active instead of re-active communication. Seminars for Cabinet and State Secretaries could focus more on the concepts and principles behind communications planning in order to help senior elected and appointed officials see the value of a coordinated approach to communications.

The Ministry of Construction and Regional Development Public Relations Department might be a good coordinator, or at least example, in this area. Some departments should have more staff members with professional backgrounds, for example journalists, linguists or marketing specialists.

Research at universities and the Academy of Sciences should be oriented more to governmental priorities in communication and governing, while still keeping the freedom of research. The Government should define its priorities and needs, and ask academics for help. If there are no domestic advisors available, the Government should ask for help from international advisors and simultaneously find new ways to improve research and education at universities and in the Academy of Sciences in Slovakia.

**5. Improved use of new technologies like the World Wide Web and Internet.**

Cheap and fast information and communication technologies should create a backbone of communications with the media. An address list of e-mail and mobile phone numbers of journalists and specialists is a must. Both easily accessible and easily navigated web pages should be regularly updated.

This should create a flexible flow of information between ministries and the Office of the Prime Minister on the one side, and regional media on the other side - e-mail offers a simple and efficient solution.

It would be useful to make information portals in various ministries and libraries accessible to citizens free of charge.

The Office of the Government seems to be the best example to follow.

**6. The need for professional development among journalists in the public media as well as government communications officials.**

Work in the public media and civil service cannot compete with the private sector in salaries, but it could and should offer attractive opportunities for professional and personal development. This would include basic skills such as writing a communications plan, linking policy and communications, drafting strategic plans and press releases, handling the media, engaging citizens and delivering “bad” news. Senior editors and civil servants should find incentives both for high quality work and self-education and training. Regular workshops should be offered; short-term stays in public media and vice-versa should be enabled. The government should define, with the consent of the media, which media should be given priority if there is not enough time for all media. Further, the aim should be to inform the public regularly about how the Government Platform is being fulfilled or not, and if not, then the reasons behind the lack of success. Officials should know how and when to inform about negative events or failures in policies – i.e. crisis management. There should be clear and binding rules for communications practices.

From another point of view, the new government should consider whether personnel changes are not counterproductive for the effective functioning of the Government and whether it is useful to pack all possible jobs with relatives and party friends.

There could be regular, open briefings of senior, reliable, credible journalists by politicians and government officials on key issues like EU and NATO accession, and various economic and social issues. Such briefings could include independent third parties like universities and foundations. These could make greater efforts to create awareness among the media of their role in the process of democratisation of Slovakia. This could include conferences, seminars and workshops on the role of the media in a democracy sponsored by the UN or other international organizations. The government could also work with the media to set up some international exchange programs.

**THE PUBLIC MEDIA SHOULD CONSIDER:**

1. The need to focus on **news that is usually less attractive but with a potentially significant impact on citizens' lives**. Perhaps increasing the specialization of journalists could work in this way.

2. The need to focus on the discussion of issues and topics **not only ‘of the day’ but also those with a potentially significant long-term impact** on citizens’ lives.
3. The need to **strengthen and make more comprehensive discussions** of issues and topics with politicians, experts and citizens.
4. The need to find ways **to empower citizens with know-how in solving problems of their interest.**
5. The need **to rotate regularly journalists between Bratislava and regional centres.** This would build a better awareness of regional and local issues, which are indeed different from Bratislava.
6. The need to enable **young journalists to experience short stays in foreign public televisions and radio stations.**

#### **THE GOLDEN RULE**

*In general, “the golden rule” for any government in any area, including successful communication, should be as follows:*

- a) create clear and binding rules of the game,*
- b) select proper professionals,*
- c) create for them the right incentives,*
- d) give them clear orders and instructions in time*
- e) and let them work...*

**SOURCES**

**Interviews:**

***Journalists, civil servants and other professionals***

Mária Ondruchová, head of Department of Analysis and Planning, The Office of the Prime Minister, 16 November 2001.

Zenon Mikle, former press secretary of Press and Information Department of the The Office of the Government, currently deputy director, 23 November 2001.

Miriám Fiťmová-Kejzlarová, former spokesperson of the Prime Minister (December 1998-August 2001), 26 November 2001.

Michal Ivantýšyn, founder and first head of Communication Department of the Office of the Government (now Department of Analysis and Planning), 26 November 2001.

Miroslav Hroch, press secretary at Press and Information Department of the The Office of the Government, 27 November 2001.

Karol Farkašovský, director of channel Rádio Slovensko (national public radio channel), 27 November 2001.

Gabriela Tosecká, journalist, Slovak Radio, 27 november 2001.

Pavel Haulík, Director of MVK polling agency, 29 November 2001.

Jaroslav Kollár, Head of the Press and Information Department, Ministry of Culture, 30 November 2001.

Ján Kubík, Office of the Government, 3 December 2001.

Jozef Mach, Department of Communication, Ministry of Finance, 3 December 2001.

Zuzana Tóthová, Department for Public Relations, Ministry of Finance, 3 December 2001.

Mária Miková, Head of the Information Department, Ministry of Post, Telecommunication and Transport, 3 December 2001.

Katarína Remiašová, Department for Public Relations, Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, 14 December 2001

Juraj Hrabko, journalist, Sme, 21 December 2001.

Milan Stanislav, deputy editor in chief, Pravda, 15 January 2002

Nora Slišková, editor, Pravda, 28 January 2002.

Vladimír Miškovský, editor in chief, Práca, 29 January 2002.

Anna Sámelová, editor, news department, Radio Twist, 31 January 2002.

Ivan Brada, journalist, Slovak Television, 3 February 2002.

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Katarína Lukáčová, editor in chief, Zemplínsky denník, 22 February 2002.

Peter Kasalovský, editor in chief, Hospodársky denník, 28 February 2002.

Tom Nicholson, editor in chief, The Slovak Spectator, 15 March 2002.

Tomasz Anusiewicz, UNDP RBEC Bratislava, 19 March, 2002

Zuzana Klímová and Peter Ivičič, Press and Communication Department of the Office of the Vice-Prime Minister for European Integration, 25 March 2002.

Tatiana Rosová, advisor on public opinion and communication to the Prime Minister, 11 April 2002.

### ***Citizens***

49 years old man recently fired from his job

36 years old woman, housewife

55 year old man, an artist

41 year old woman, an economist

69 year old pensioner

27 year old nurse

20 member group of third year students of communication

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