
CONTROVERSY OF MEDIA DISCOURSES IN (A)POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS TO REFERENDUM FOR PROTECTION OF FAMILY 2015 IN MEDIA SPACE IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

The submitted report focuses on the controversy of media discourses within their visual and audio-visual aspects that were applied to (a)political campaigns to the referendum for the protection of family in media space in Slovakia in 2015. The introduction refers to some events that contributed to initiation of public plebiscite and reflect contextual contingency of the Slovak society attitude to fundamental family issue regarding exclusivity of marital relationship between a man and a woman, the adoption of children by the persons of the same sex, as well as sex education in schools. It deals with institutionalised aspect of family and diversity of family life in Slovakia. Subsequently, by the means of stated examples regarding visual and audio-visual discourses it draws its attention to obstacles of controversial advertising application that has a tendency to divide society opinions, as well as open a new discussion aimed at redefining of ethics principles.

Keywords: media, television, advertising, political, campaign

1. Introduction

The referendum for protection of family turned to be one of the most fundamental national political issues promoted in the media in the first half of 2015 in Slovakia. The eighth national plebiscite initiated by Alliance for the Family was held on 7 February, 2015. It put a spotlight on controversial issues regarding marital relationship between a man and woman, not allowing adoption for the same gender couples and sex education in schools. The central queries of the referendum were as follows: 1. Do you agree that no other cohabitation but the union between one man and one woman should be called marriage? 2. Do you agree that neither same sex couples nor groups shall be allowed to adopt children and subsequently raise them? 3. Do you agree that schools cannot

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require the participation of children in classes dedicated to sexual behaviour or euthanasia if their parents or the children themselves do not agree with the content of the lessons?

The Slovak public was confronted with numerous discussions in media that since the very first beginning reflected opinion diversity to the issued being solved. Peculiarity of referendum controversy in its thematic profile was contributed by (a)political media discourses, which became on one hand a part of pro-family campaigns and on the other hand a part of aggressive anti-campaigns of political subjects or other citizens' movements. Confrontation between both groups had a tendency to divide society in contradictory arguments opening a question of suppression of fundamental human rights and freedoms relating to population minority. Through its representatives Catholic Church being in a significant position, declared its statement of active participation on referendum on the part of the citizens, whereas it put an emphasis on the uniqueness of the opportunity to express the support and protection of a traditional family model. In general, The Slovak Republic is considered to be a Catholic country with the strong influence of religion, especially Catholicism, which roots are historically attributed to Church traditions, religiousness and its related dogmatism. Its identity structure implies deeply rooted Christian traditions whereas certain degree of liberalism regarding the issues of a modern family has not maintained status of reinterpretation of central position.

The referendum for the Protection of Family in Slovakia has its exclusivity in the aspect of communicative public stimulation. From the marketing point of view one of the most dominant means of communication were applied - the advertisement. The advertising in its various positions and its very application has transformed itself into the position of non-exclusivity of participation on social-political discourse of one of the most fundamental plebiscite milestone in Slovakia. The submitted report focuses on usage of commercial discourses at events that shape the state system of government in passing jurisdictional provisions being essential while forming the society. It demonstrates the justness of advertising participating on fundamental queries that in time and space relate to the development of public. Controversy related to adequacy of advertising application in its visual or audio-visual aspect within ethical principles of international codes and sanctions instigates to certain reinterpretation of participation on social public issues. Submitted appeal resulting from awareness instigates to the fact Chlebcová Hečková draws her attention to; in advertising there shall be no *“using of false, deformed and negative news”* as well as misuse of fear and prejudice lasting in every society. [1].

2. Family and diversity of family life forms in Slovakia

The Slovak Republic, similarly as other post-communist states, observed dynamic changes of family behaviour after 1989. Political and social events experienced in 90s of the last century in the central European area contributed to

a dynamic transition from totalitarian regime to building up a social order based on principles of democratic values being implemented into all the areas: political, economic, social, and cultural. Importance of this transformation resulted in a radical change within social norms and values and in a short time in norms and values of family itself as well. And so for the past two decades Slovak family redefined itself due to external political-economic influence.

In general, family is considered to be the most important, most intimate social group, institution, economic unit as well as the basic element of social structure of a society. Being influenced by social and economic conditions, cultural changes and also by penetrating of influence of various cultures and demographic processes, the relationships between spouses, children and other family members are being changed. Regarding to changing social environment there is currently no clear definition of a nuclear family. Basic terminological definition of the term ‚family‘ is quite problematic considering various definitions of diverse scientific disciplines (Sociology, Psychology, Demography, Law, etc.) and from the point of view of numerous theoretical approaches (psychoanalytical, behavioural, systematic, etc.) and based on numerous aspects (relationships, roles, functions, socialization, etc.) According to sociological definition family is a group of persons mutually related by blood [2]. Big sociological dictionary defines family as *“generally original and most fundamental social structure and institution that is the basic element of social structure and basic economic unit which main function is reproduction of human biological species and upbringing, respectively socialisation of posterity, as well as transfer of cultural patterns and maintenance of culture development continuity”* [3].

The evolution of family is gradually becoming more and more dynamic, whereby retrospective view on family within European space of the last two decades reveals in its genesis of family relationships and structure following primary processes [4]:

- Democratisation of family relationships, that is a gradual change of traditional patriarchal family relationships based on the authority of a man and subordination of children to their parents to modern relationships being equal from the gender as well as generation point of view;
- Individualisation of family relationships, gradual transition from existing relationships preferentially determined by human origin to relationships mostly chosen created by free choice of an individual and based on mutual discussion;
- Dynamisation of family, e.g. a family becomes more and more open, approachable, and adaptable to changes being brought by the society development together with changes in individual development of a human being;
- Pluralisation of family structures and forms e.g. family builds on former processes and creates still broader and more complex platform of family relationships, forms a higher number of family structures being controlled by new own behaviour.

Non-formal spouse relationships, cohabitation during the last four decades have been extensively broadened in the majority of post-industrial states and have become the common form of partner coexistence whereby the meaning and a function of a family are markedly influenced. For established demographical change the declination from traditional family model is prevailing within the typical coexistence of married couple and children upbringing. The number of partners living together and single parent families is increasing. Relatively many couples postpone parenthood to later. The main arguments are the following: increasing costs needed for children upbringing, unsteadiness of the labour market, as well as increasing of education – all of them influence demographical changes in the area of nuptiality, fertility, birth rate, divorce rate, etc. Concerning the information stated above more authors (Tydlitátová [5], Polakevičová & Kopernická, [6]) state that nowadays it is possible to observe increase of alternative forms of family coexistence, e.g. declination from traditional forms of marriage. A number of relevant scientific authorities define the following definitions of current family in the territory of Slovakia:

- nuclear family loses its ritualized form,
- discontinuity of generations and the change of family structure,
- declination of family steadiness,
- development of contraception use and planned parenthood,
- changes in family cycle organization,
- two-career-marriages,
- prolonging life expectancy and family durability after children leaving,
- secularization,
- higher emphasis on material values,
- a number of family functions being taken over by social institutions.

The above mentioned reflects the fact that from the historical point of view, the Slovak family has been subject to significant changes. It changed from patriarchal family to two-generation family, nuclear family; from traditional family to modern event to postmodern family, from family with fixed roles of a man and woman to partner family implicating homosexual partnerships [7]. Partnerships of same sex persons were tabooed during the communist regime, however, nowadays thanks to liberalization of society, homosexuality is more widely presented as the following authors state: “*after 1989 more organizations that associate people with homosexual or bisexual orientation were established in Slovakia. They support growing of their own subculture and their way of life or they defend their rights.*” [8] Therefore, under the conditions of the Slovak Republic, the importance to maintain the marriage concept as a bond between a man and woman as it is defined in the Family Act and other international treaties for human rights protection was initiated. With respect to the above mentioned, on 4 June, 2014 the Slovak Parliament adopted the amendment of the Constitution that markedly strengthen the constitutional protection of marriage - marriage is the unique union between a man and a woman. The Slovak Republic broadly protects and promotes its good.

3. Controversial advertising as a part of (a)political campaign

Advertising is frequently regarded to be the synonym of marketing communication, as far as together with personal selling, direct marketing, public relations or support of sale it is the most visible tool. Contrary to stated communication effect, advertising as the only uses media such as print, radio, television to broaden marketing message [9-11]. Advertisement is currently terminologically defined by American Marketing Association as: “*Any announcement or persuasive message placed in the mass media in paid or donated time or space by an identified individual, company or organization*” [12]. From psychological point of view advertisement is a certain form of communication with communicative intention that is being very transparent because the overall volume of investments into this field is easily analysable and exemplified by the mass media content. Advertisement helps to create the lasting image of products, brands, companies and can serve as a stimulating tool motivating to purchasing activity [13-16]. The objective of the advertisement is to attract receivers’ interest and instigate them to behave in accordance with sponsor’s requirements. Over the last few years it is possible to observe the establishment of advertisement and marketing itself into the area of politics. Following the assumption of several authors who are concerned with marketing in the area of politics it is possible to state that there is an exchange relationship between political subjects and their voters whereas the candidates themselves are in political battle of the business object [17-19].

In connection with the held referendum for family protection, advertising discourses were used for its propaganda which in their visual or audio-visual form implied the controversy nature. It is also pointed out by the fact that the Arbitration Committee of the Slovak Advertising Standards Council (SASC) as a body for ethic self-regulation in the area of advertising assessed complaints referring to their application in (a)political campaigns of subjects being involved. Based on stated stimuli it decided to find out if the selected advertisements did or did not break the Code of Ethics for Advertising Practice on the territory of the Slovak Republic. The first advertising discourse was a banner ‘This is not discrimination, this simply does not work this way’ whose sponsor was the Alliance for the Family. SASC received many complaints regarding the problematic banner that according to claimants disparages the human dignity and shows the signs of discrimination based on human gender. It was also mentioned that advertising visual prefers only one acceptable family model and it implicitly evokes that other forms of partner relationships are not fully functional. Therefore the advertisement disparages not only homosexual couples but also other groups of population such as childless couples and single mothers and fathers.

SACS reviewed all relevant proposals and came to conclusion that complaints were well founded what was declared by its statement that: “The banner: ‘This is not discrimination, this simply does not work this way’ of the

sponsor: Alliance for the family, is in conflict with the provisions of the Sect. 13 (6) of the Code”.

The opposite argument to banner campaign was announced by The Alliance for the Family in its declaration on its official website with a statement that by launching billboard campaign “our aim was to express that only between a man and a woman there is conception therefore the marriage and family are unique. Our billboard does not say about the relationships and does not judge them. Children need their father and mother.” In this case SASC did not agree with the sponsor’s statement that banner does not say about relationships and does not judge them. According to SASC the visual display in its presentation implied discrimination of selected groups of people that do not form a family in traditional meaning of this word - a woman, man and a child. Therefore, it was not explicitly possible to interpret the visual of advertisement in terms of the objective of advertisement defined by the sponsor, namely that only a man and a woman can bear a child. In the context of text headline: ‘This is not a discrimination, this simply does not work this way’, it is suggestively implied that the exclusive family model consists of - a mother, a father and a child and therefore there is a discrimination of other family models, e.g. a child raised by grandparents, single parent family, childless married couples (a man and a woman) or with reference to used visual that depicts two men as well as partnerships of the same sex and eventually child being raised by two men or two women. For the above reasons, SASC decided that the billboard advertisement supports discrimination from the gender point of view and breaks the Code of Ethics for advertising practice. Its statement was supported by following: *“the advertisement shall not support any form of discrimination in particular because of race, nationality, religion, political affiliation, gender or age”* [RPR, <http://www.rpr.sk/sk/novinky/tlacova-sprava-zo-7--zasadnutia-ak-rpr-104>].

Alliance for the Family came into confrontation with an official audio-visual spot which was refused to be broadcasted by private televisions in Slovakia: Markíza, Joj and the Public Radio and Television of Slovakia (hereinafter referred to as RTVS). This discourse was considered controversial because it shall not describe the real process of adoption. It depicts the situation where at the very beginning a boy draws a picture of a traditional family. Following this his new adoptive parents are coming. However, they are two men holding each other’s hand and the child asks in surprise: “And where is my mother?” voiceover subsequently ends the spot speaking: “Children are clear with it”. Within the contextual meaning it was possible to define anti-homosexual content of the discourse.

Alliance for the Family’s representatives responded to refusal of Slovak televisions not to broadcast the spot supporting the Referendum for the protection of family by considering the refusal to be illegal censorship in media. At the press conference the spokesman stated following: *“The Constitution of the Slovak Republic is laid on fundamental human rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, as well as the fact that marriage is a marriage of a man*

and a woman” [TASR, 2015, *Aliancia za rodinu reagovala na odmietnutie televíziei odvysielať spot*, <http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/aliancia-za-rodinu-reagovala-na-odmietnu/115693-clanok.html>]. According to him many media faced a pressure not to open public discussion that should have been initiated by the alliance spot: “*We are not a political party, we are citizens’ initiative, more than 109 civil associations, and therefore provisions regarding political advertising do not refer to us*”. However, the advertising spot was published by the Christian web postoy.sk and from 21 January the TV station TV LUX decided to broadcast it. According to its spokeswoman: “*TV LUX does not see the problem in its broadcasting as far as it meets the legal forms of the Slovak Republic*” [STRATÉGIE, 2015, *Reklama Aliancie za rodinu napokon bude v televíziei. V kresťanskej*, <http://strategie.hnonline.sk/spravy/media/reklama-aliancie-za-rodinu-napokon-bude-v-televizii-v-krestanskej>]. TV LUX broadcasted the audio-visual spot for 250 times without any financial reward. Lux is a Christian television where the majority shareholder is the Conference of Slovak Bishops. However, it has got less penetration than the televisions which refused to broadcast the spot.

Another audiovisual spot contributed to gradual escalating emotions in society regarding the forthcoming referendum day. The Alliance for Family expressed supportive statement for this spot, but it dissociates itself from it. The main protagonist of the advertising spot was a teenager and men couple wearing wedding rings presenting a homosexual couple. By depiction of so called ‘modern family’ the spot made an appeal to archaic feelings and provoked an outrage in the entire society. “I am growing up in the environment of affection, pleasant tenderness and mutual attention. Marriage, family and upbringing can look like this in one’s opinion”, says the teenager with despondent voice at the beginning of the spot immediately following by an appeal to citizens to participate in referendum on 7 February. The appeal of stimulation is stated by interpreted words in aggressive tone of louder voice: “Would you like to grow up like this?”

The video was released on new domain 7februar.sk which was created with the aim to motivate people to participate at referendum. The website states: “This website was established as a citizens’ initiative and except the common goal it has nothing in common with the Alliance for Family. However it deserves our thanks and appreciation for organization of the petition for announcing the referendum, as well as for the struggle it has to face”. One of the fundamental ethical problems of the mentioned spot spread virally is a cast of a child to be the main person. The use of children in advertising is governed by specific rules. The controversy of this video results in lawsuit, whereas the political party Freedom and Solidarity filed a complaint against unknown offender. According to the party’s spokeswoman it is a crime of extremism, particular supporting and promoting of groups aimed at suppress the fundamental rights and freedoms.

4. Conclusions

The referendum for the protection of family was held on 7 February, 2015 and it was one of the fundamental milestones in the history of the independent Slovak Republic. The Slovak public was invited to vote on three questions regarding marriage, children adoption and sex education in schools. The initiator of the referendum which was organized as a logical consequence of the petition of citizens in April 2014 was the civil pro family movement - Alliance for Family. Voting in the referendum was attended by 21.41% of eligible voters, which resulted from the official results published by the Central Commission for the referendum. Referendum was deemed invalid due to low participation of eligible voters that did not exceed 50%. To achieve the referendum results being binding, the absolute majority of eligible voters, which is about 2.2 million of people, must participate on the Referendum. More than 944 000 citizens participated in voting. The answers to all three questions being subject to the referendum prevailed with more than 90% response 'yes'. However, this controversial Referendum provoked some upsetting reactions across the European Union. Except the content of Referendum itself it was astonishing that Slovak citizens did not ask to make a decision on their own rights, but on minority rights, whereas in democratic society the equal right shall not be denied to minority. A few advertising discourses being a part of (a)political campaign regarding the Referendum contributed to this controversy. In their visual and audio-visual form they created certain provocation (not to) participate in profiling the political organization of the country. Official banner and advertising spot of the Alliance for Family as well as viral video of unknown sponsor appealed to participation in Referendum and they can be considered as distinct. All the discourses mentioned violate the limits of legislative standards at various levels which relate to ethical application of advertising within conditions in Slovakia due to Code of Ethics for Advertising Practice or The Act on Broadcasting and Retransmission. Using of these non-ethical discourses instigates to appeal on sponsors as well as advertising creators to participate in public discourse in relation to political communication or political events through campaigns with no discrimination of human rights and freedoms.

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