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# INFLUENCE OF MASS MEDIA ON THE CURRENT POSITION OF CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SLOVAKIA

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## Abstract

The presented paper deals with the relationship between the mass media and the Catholic Church, which has the largest representation and number of members in Slovakia. The first part is an overview of the mass media in Slovakia, their goals, tools and fields of influence related to Christian Church. The second part of the article deals with the dimensional definition of Christian media, their most known representatives and the impact on the overall media space in Slovakia. Based on the research, I conclude that Slovakia is still more conservative than liberal country and the Church plays an essential role in the political and social system.

*Keywords:* Christian Church, media, Slovakia, influence

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## 1. Introduction

The effect of mass media in its dynamic forms often deepens confusion and chaos on social issues. If the media want to have respect and trust from people, they must also be willing to be subject of research and to respond positively to legitimate criticism. Liberal democracy (not only in Slovakia) needs credible media to its functioning. Their credibility also depends on the degree of objectivity they report on topics related to Christianity and the Church. At this time when various disinformation media and fake news - often purposefully - join their activities with, among other things, Christian values, serious media must be particularly cautious in a way how they report on these issues. The interest to hear the views of Church leaders should be part of every sincere search for the answer to the question of whether mainstream media - including opinion-making journals - report on the mentioned issues professionally and without bias.

The media is here to inform about the Church in the same way as about other civil activities and initiatives. This means that when a Church does something that goes beyond social affairs - whether positive or negative - the media should objectively inform all residents of our country. The quality of news and comments is directly proportional to the quality of their authors.

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Important issues in this debate therefore concern the criteria that a person who writes on religion and Church as a whole should meet.

I have to emphasize competence, transparency and the ability to direct emotions on rigorous research, verification of resources and not into groundless statements, attacks or arguments. The author should have adequate knowledge and understanding of the Church's reality and an unbiased, professional interest in bringing important news to readers. Of course, information can also be given through a critical view. We see this, for example, with Vatican journalists from abroad (specializing in questions of the Papal State). They know to be very critical, but they do not perceive 'newsworthy' stories only as a subset of something negative. Most often, the situation in Church is described in the mainstream media by dissenting theologians and displaced priests. Many of them have personal conflicts with the Church. It is enough for editors and it is acceptable for their editorial lines. They have no ambition to overcome this 'bias' by adding authors/sources who are not bitter and do not want to be quits with Catholic Church.

## **2. Discussion**

A common criticism of the discussed Slovak media is that they use a double meter against the Church. If this assumption will be confirmed on the base of certain analysis, it can be a problem from the point of view of journalistic ethics, but it may also be a hidden blessing for the Church itself. It is one of the many paradoxes of life. For example, if the topic of sexual abuse in the Church is under more media control than the same problem in other contexts, from the perspective of Christian ethics, the media do service for Christians. They help Church to approach the ideals which are claimed by it. It would be wrong to blame the media for bringing news about the problems that the Church itself has caused. A good example of such an unintended service was the serious revelations of the Boston Globe reporters in 2002 [M. Rezendes, Boston Globe, January 6, 2002], which ultimately helped (not only) a particular church, despite moral and material damage.

In the Slovak conditions, we see the toughest struggle between liberals and conservatives in the media, but also in the linguistic field (in terms of Church questions). In a small European Catholic country like Slovak Republic, we do not know so much about the issues of religious fundamentalism (linked to terrorism) or new religious movements (especially those of sectarian nature). The Slovak problem, in particular, is the solution of the contradiction between sacral and secular and the clarity of interpreting religious messages through the media (closely related to the professionalism of particular editors and in secular media, as in religious media).

A large part of the current Slovak research of this field has a distinctly linguistic character and is rather concerned with the religious style: its characteristics, or whether it is a separate style or a different category (e.g. communication sphere). After 1990, the most important person in this field was

Jozef Mistrík, who tried to enforce its existence in the form of a separate linguistic style, defined it with formal characteristics (from vocabulary to nonverbal expressions) [1]. A similar attitude is taken by František Kočiš, who adds the specifics of the essential communication of man with God and of God with man, resulting from the ontological essence of religion as a relationship between man and God [2]. Similar authors in this topic are Eugen Pauliny, Jozef Kútnik-Šmálov or Jozef Mlacek [3]. In relation to the Journalism as a scientific discipline, the religious style was examined in Slovak conditions by Terézia Rončáková. I found that our authors of religious style are also inspired by foreign literature, especially by Polish authors. There are several reasons - common Christian tradition, linguistic similarity or many available and high-quality publications on this issue. For example, I can mention Marzena Makuchowska or Maria Wojtak [4].

Media research on the connection of religious and mass communication freed from linguistic approaches is currently the domain of the Department of Journalism at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University in Ružomberok. Young team of researchers led by Tadeusz Zasepa, has published several monographs on this topic: *Media in the Time of Globalization* (2002), *Power and Media Disease* (2003), *Internet and Globalization* (2006), *Ethics in Journalism* (2009) or *Television at home* (2011). We can consider these publications to be fundamental elements of the study of Catholic Church influence in the Slovak mass media. They provide a frame of the evolution of Church and media relations, the process of implementing religious content into mass communication mechanisms, or how to address with these topics as many people as possible. They are trying to popularize religious themes, but on the other hand want to preserve their spiritual character [5].

Former General Bishop of the Evangelical Church Juraj Janoška founded the magazine *Evanjelický Posol* (Evangelical Missioner) especially to defend against the sectarian movement in the region of Liptov. In that time, he saw a situation in which people lack a magazine that would help spread and deepen evangelical awareness. Janoška already knew about the impact and importance of the media and about the importance of newspapers. For the first time *Posol* appeared in 1910, and later spread to Hungary, Romania, United States or Australia. Today it has more than twenty thousand readers. Even a longer history, but a little less readers have *Cirkevné listy* (Clerical letters). The initiator of their creation in 1863 was the significant Slovak nationalist Jozef Miloslav Hurban, later revived by bishop Janoška again. They were very vigorous and bold in Church and national issues, for the equalization of Slovaks in Austro-Hungarian Empire, opposed the Hungarianization of the Slovak territory and they uniquely opposed both world wars through the poetry and articles of our writers like Martin Rázus, Fedor Fridrich Ruppeldt or Samuel Štefan Osuský. This persistence and long history should be worthy of follow.

I argue that media research should also be supported by patterns from abroad. In my opinion, cooperation with the universities and other professional institutions is an appropriate way. We already register this trend in Slovakia in

recent years gradually. Terézia Rončáková and Imrich Gazda work closely with the partner Pontifical University of Santa Croce in Rome, especially with her Faculty of Social Institutional Communication. In this way, Rončáková gradually moved from the linguistic-oriented work to the research of wider media and religious communication, applying qualitative methods of group research and content analysis with a focus on generally shared beliefs.

Gazda examines the media processing of major religious events headed by papal foreign pastoral journeys. It is mostly implemented by the method of content analysis, namely the monitoring of frames. The mentioned works provide a certain formal concept of religious themes in the Slovak media space. I regard them as a key to the theory and direction of the Catholic Church in relation to the mass media. Of course, a number of new publications is growing and the Church has to adapt to this trend. We may notice a developmental trend that shows the state of the examined problem. The intensive contact of religion and modern media has been around for over 80 years, and interdisciplinary research on this has been developing for about 30 years. From exploring the ways in which Churches and religious groups use the media, how the media process religious themes, and how journalistic prejudice, non-professionalism and secular orientation enter to this process - the researchers are gradually moving towards thinking about the religious character of the media, about the link between religious and mass communication mediation or political dimension of religion cooperating with the media. According to the global trend in this research area, there is a need for greater attention on the reception, processing and exploitation (audience research) of religious texts instead of the position of these texts themselves in the media space. It is also necessary to identify the contact and friction points of religious and mass communication mediation. In this context, it seems particularly appropriate to use the way of exploring the basic shared ideas. This is one of the spaces in which the religion and the media meet on a fundamental level.

We can define research into the relationship between religion and media in three groups:

1. Mediated religion - a. religious influence of the media,  
b. religion as a medium;
2. Media criticism - a. sacral and secular relationship,  
b. anti-religious prejudice in the media,  
c. media access to new religious movements,  
d. religious language style vs. journalistic language style;
3. Religious media audience [6].

An important issue is the media's affection for Church themes. Some of them are systematically negative towards these topics and tasks. The Church as an object for the media is very sensitive in being a Christian value holder and that is why, in times of value crisis, it resonates too much if members of the Church make mistakes [7]. They prove that are people like us, but the public perceives them as too ideal. The Catholic Church is not so protected aim in Slovak media space as it should be. Therefore is often used to create some

negative stories. With the media, the Church must learn to live and learn not only to defend against them, but also to use them in a good way. It is also one of the challenging missions that religious leaders must take in today's modern world to spread and defend faith itself. Today, the question of religion is often associated with negative news or even violence. In particular, secular media are still working to make faith in God beyond social life or education. In my opinion, the Church is the conscience of society, and this is becoming relative and weakening by these media. The media often put it on and simplify, but not only in relation to the Christian Church. There are also media that are in favour of it, but the Church itself sometimes responds to them too sensitively (for example, some time ago to the magazine 'Zrno' (Grain)). However, the Church also has its own media, which are not so active here and deliberately avoid certain controversial and social issues. I think that the Church should be more proactive and open in its own media.

The Catholic Church is considered to be the most media-intensive in Slovakia, but it still has little impact in this field compared to other countries. Journalists also have their patron - Saint Francis de Sales. Vatican as a state has its own radio, television or newspaper. Pope has the spokesman and the Pontifical Council for Social Communication publishes various media instructions. Similarly, in Slovakia, Bishops Conference of Slovakia (KBS) has a press office and a media council led by the Bratislava archbishop Stanislav Zvolenský. All dioceses have spokesmen too. Then, Catholic newspapers, Lumen Radio, LUX Television, and many other professional and parish periodicals work in the Christian media field. In the Church's pastoral plan from 2001 to 2006, several proposals for the media appeared, for example, a survey of what the public expected of Christian media. However, the following plans have not surprisingly included the media.

According to the prominent Slovak priest Marian Gavenda, the '7-year concept' is a guide rather than a plan. It focuses on topics of Theology and faith as a whole [M. Demko, *Cirkvi médiá potrebujú, preto majú vlastné*, KBS, 2011, <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/masmedia-50/p/tlacene/c/teologicke-a-odborne>, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/5742735/cirkvi-media-potrebuju-preto-maju-vlastne.html>]. I am not sure whether it is right that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Catholic Church has not mentioned the media in its long-term strategies. It is obvious that their potential is enormous. A good example is the position of Catholic newspapers in a national context. It occupies the sixth position in the weekly edition of more than 85,000 copies. Content is fully in line with the Church's ideas. According to the Editor-in-chief Mária Bílá, bishops do not intervene in the selection of topics unless the newspaper goes against Catholic doctrine. They are considerate and do not make a pressure on what should or should not be published in newspapers [8]. I am sure that with these parameters, the newspaper should push for much more within the Slovak media market. There are several reasons for its weak influence. The most crucial thing I think is the absence of criticism inside the Church. The Editor-in-chief admitted it and

the situation is unlikely to change in the near future. I am afraid that in this way the Church will not have a stronger position in Slovak media space.

In my view, another important fact is the absence of competition in print form. Catholic newspapers have a monopoly status and citizens do not have a different opinion for comparison. Once again, I can give one example from practice. It is just mentioned magazine 'Zrno'. After 1989, it appeared as an alternative to Catholic newspapers. Until 2006 it also had a Church approval, which was then taken away by former Košice's archbishop Alojz Tkáč. First, the former archbishop Ján Sokol denied to sell magazine in the churches of his diocese, followed by other bishops a few months later. The local competent bishop (according to the publishing house), who finally took Church approval, was one of the last. The publisher of 'Zrno' has not known the reasons for 'prohibition' yet – even after 13 years. I did not find the official reasons for ignoring the magazine also. With the name expressing maturity, hope and orientation, is just going through today, though it still has its supporters. External constraints are obvious - under the communist regime the periphery of society and the threat of prison, in the free market times is threatened with bankruptcy. But the strongest restrictions are internal. Not everything they write is useful for Slovak Christian Church.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church in Slovakia can rely on a significant political party, easily defined by name – Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement - KDH). It is a stable member of the Slovak parliamentary system. Despite being out of the National Council at the moment, according to surveys it has a solid chance to return there after the next elections in 2020. From the media point of view it is the strongest representative of the Christian Church in Slovakia at all. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, politicians of this party had several conflicts with the media. I can mention Vladimír Palko, Pavol Minárik or Július Brocka. The essence of most of them concerned biased information about political decisions of this party, which was three times part of the government in the history of an independent Slovakia. For example, according to former Interior Minister Palko, the Slovak media did not manage the freedom brought by the year 1989. There is little competence and little honesty in them [9]. However, it must be added that the former KDH leadership had various cases and scandals that have been opened by journalists. So, the negative relationship of some politicians to media is therefore obviously logical. Because of the media revelations, even the significant persons of party history had to resign, for example Pavol Hrušovský or Ján Figel' (leaders of party in years 2000–2016). The party began to realize that without an appropriate relationship with the media, it would gradually lose its voters and would not be able to pursue the interests of the Christian Church at the highest state level. However, with a turn in position, a change in party leadership had to come. KDH was in big trouble, and for the first time in history it did not reach parliament limit in the 2016 elections.

The support of several legal norms in favour of the media did not help either, in the years 2012-2016 the social democratic government wanted to limit their influence or to punish the offenses more severely. Christian democrats as opposition party were against these measures. MP from KDH Pavol Abrhan even proposes an amendment to the Press Act in 2015. It wants to prohibit all public authorities from restricting media access to information. It was not often the case that this party was so positive towards secular media. On the other hand, it was one of the last attempts to save falling preferences and gain new voters. Abrhan explained that thanks to his amendment, the government would not be allowed to select journalists for comfortable and uncomfortable. In general, we can consider the imposition of an information embargo on the concrete medium as a gross abuse of power against the media.

As I said, this type of change did not bring the desired success to KDH. However, three years after the elections the situation is different. The new leader Alojz Hlina brought radical changes into the party's functioning and today he is again addressing Christian voters. He realized that they had to communicate more often and better with the media. Interestingly, Hlina gets so much space in the media as the representatives of the current parliamentary parties. He is a new type of politician, but still professes traditional Christian and conservative values.

### **3. Conclusions**

There is a great opportunity for Christian media to influence public opinion on the Church in a positive way, in Slovakia. However, we must fulfil the condition of defining the strategy, priorities and funding, and of course their implementation. They can take an example and inspiration from smaller churches in Slovakia and their media outcomes. They are not strong, but often point to controversial and problematic issues. Christian media avoid them regularly. The opposite attitude is preferred by the second most numerous Church in Slovakia – the Evangelical Church.

Sooner or later, it will be necessary to open the internal Church clarification of issues such as divorce, marriage after divorce, contraception, premarital sex, homosexuality, or abortion. Most Christian media (perhaps with the exception of TV LUX) struggle with typical problems (not only) of smaller media - how to ensure themselves financially and by content. But I think they are connected with a strong idea. They are trying to show readers the practical aspects of God's plan to save people through Jesus Christ and show the true effect of God's power in today's world. The aim of the modern Church should be to motivate critical thinking, to support peaceful coexistence among members of different religions and to reach potential interested persons for Christianity and religion at all. The media and religion are permanently linked. If the media wants to be objective and truthful about what moves society and the people who live in it, they certainly cannot avoid religious themes. The invention of radio and television has given people new opportunities for mutual understanding and

has caused revolutionary changes in their way of life. The phenomenon of recent years - cyber space - is a new frontier. For religious communities, this new world is a challenge to use its possibilities to proclaim the God's message. Thus, not only classical forms, but also modern mechanisms of social communication, such as the Internet, which is currently the fastest growing mass media, can be used for the spread of faith as a whole. The Church's attitude to the Internet was already described by Pope John Paul II in a message saying that the Church is looking at the Internet with realism and hope, seeing it as a very valuable tool for Christianity and other religions. The active and creative use of information and communication technologies to increase knowledge is also the ambition of the Catholic Church. Therefore, it seeks to support information and communication technologies in education and the spread of faith all over the world [10].

In the conditions of Slovakia, the mass media are becoming stronger as socializing and educative tool, which can greatly influence not only individuals, but whole groups and even masses of people. In my opinion, the Catholic Church still has a significant position in our country. It reaches almost all fields of life. But with the approach of liberalism and other modern trends, competition is growing very fast. These movements have conquered a large part of the media space, and the Church must struggle to favour the viewer in other ways or adapt to this form of promotion. The positive thing is that it starts working with the web, social networks or marketing tools [11]. On the other hand, against the new philosophical lines, it is still lagging behind in this way and needs to be improved. As I said, the KDH return to Parliament, the creation of a unified marketing model and, in particular, pointing to various (and also controversial) topics in society but also within the Catholic Church can help them significantly.

We can also compare this situation with other countries of the Central European or Balkan region. For example, in Serbia the seven traditional religious groups recognized by law are automatically registered in the Register of Churches and Religious Communities. In addition to these groups, the government grants traditional status, solely in Vojvodina Province, to the Diocese of Dacia Felix of the Romanian Orthodox Church, with its seat in Romania and administrative seat in Vrsac in Vojvodina. Articles critical of non-traditional religious groups appeared in the press, primarily in the tabloid media, including private and government-owned outlets. Several non-traditional religious leaders reported the media often labelled non-traditional religions as 'sects', which they stated contributed to negative stereotyping. Some leaders of traditional Churches complained media coverage also misrepresented the nature of their religious groups. Religious leaders reported there were initiatives to improve relations among religious communities, including an interfaith television program in which a mufti, a rabbi, and an archbishop participated as part of an effort to encourage tolerance between religious groups [US Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*, Washington D.C., 2016, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269108.pdf>].



In Hungary, the situation is slightly different, the state is significantly interfering with media content. Clergy itself is not also unanimous in relation to media. One part of the clergy definitely stays off any media coverage either for personal habitual reasons or because in the world of media they can often become the victims of character assassination as it is fashionably put. There are some who use the option of media appearance but unfortunately they do not break down but rather confirm the stereotypes that live in the Hungarian audience; they appear to be distant in the better case and condescending and lofty in the worse case. As far as authenticity is concerned it must be added that since Pope Francis is so popular and authentic, where does the Hungarian Church position itself as it affects its own authenticity, too. On the basis of media representation we can say that they are slightly distant from Pope Francis' reforms. It shows that for the time being Hungarian speakers do not benefit from the authenticity turn marked by Pope Francis. The clergymen presented authentically in Hungarian media can be found in areas where secular society approves of the operation of the church: in case of charity activities. In Hungary the leaders of the Caritas and Baptist Charity Service and Csaba Bőjte, a Franciscan monk, belong to the most authentic figures [12].

The last example is from Romania. Romina Surugiu in her article 'Media and religion in Romania – three contexts and a discussion' analyses the relation between media and the Eastern Orthodox religion - the dominant religion in Romania. She examines the existing sociological theories on religion and their relevance for understanding the Orthodox world today, the religious media and the secular media in Romania. The first context referred to the existing sociological theories on religion and their relevance for understanding the Orthodox world today. A major gap was identified between the theories that are substantiated in Western (read Catholic and Protestant) realities, and the recent developments in Eastern Europe related to an increase in religiosity after a period of forced secularization. The relationship between media and religion in the Orthodox realm is also difficult to explain using the contemporary theoretical framework of the sociology of religion. Moreover, as the two other contexts revealed, there is a fervent activity in the fields of both religious media and secular journalism. The public discourse is influenced by the increasing use of religious symbols and themes, present at the same time in media and in politics [13].

To sum up, the position of the Catholic Church is still strong in Slovakia. Although it does not have as much space in the media as in other countries, it plays an important role in society. On the other hand, there are no religious conflicts such as in Serbia. However, this is also due to ethnic composition and historical tensions between members of different religious groups. Another conclusion arises from state interference into the media space. The most fundamental are undoubtedly in Hungary. The government party of Fidesz is strongly cooperating with the Catholic Church. It often refers to Christian values and promotes them in its own politics. However, it controls the entire media market and significantly regulates the broadcasting as a whole. In Slovakia, the

situation is slightly different. The media is divided into religious and secular (similar to Romania), but they do not much affect the content and composition of the broadcasting. They are intended for a selected group of supporters and can form public opinion only in rare cases.

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