

Contesting the shrinking media space in Slovakia

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The March 2016 elections took Slovakia by surprise: the neo-Nazi Kotleba – LSNS (Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia) won 8 per cent of the vote. It was an already dissolved party, which had renewed its activities, having hardly ever won more than 1.5 per cent in the polls. Now they are in the Parliamentary opposition, rather silently, but some NGOs have already received emails from one of the Kotleba members asking for them to disclose all their sources of income and the party has proposed a law to make a compulsory registry of foreign-financed NGOs in order to “protect the country from foreign ideologies”. Although politically marginal, the direction of the party’s activities does not make Slovak liberals feel at all comfortable.

How did we get here? As the post-election analysis shows, the majority of voters did not vote for them because they are neo-Nazis, but in spite of this. For many, it was a protest vote, against mainstream parties that were either perceived as embroiled in corruption scandals or as no alternative at all. Part of the problem here is the absence of any progressive movement that would embody a different narrative. There is no established Leftist party or credible Leftist political institution. All that remained of the former Communist Party (renamed the Party of the Democratic Left in the 1990s), as well as the “original”, pre-war Social Democrats, have been consumed into SMER-SD, the ruling Social Democrats, who implement only very rudimentary Leftist policies, otherwise being a very mainstream party in the true sense of the word.

The disintegrated trade unions are of no help either. Over the years, they were only able to achieve very small victories and it is up to smaller associations and journalist platforms to represent any sort of counter-

narrative. Increasingly, this gap is filled by far-right parties and the proliferation of conspiracy-prone, self-declared “alternative” media, active online.

Divisive media sphere

Since 2013, we have witnessed the exponential growth of so-called ‘alternative media’, initially published online, but also increasingly in print. These media groups portray themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media, delivering ‘uncensored’ truth. They also often collaborate with traditional far-right websites and organisations, which have had a political presence since the 1990s. These media groups have turned seemingly harmless conspiracy theories into a platform for hate-speech, extremism and anti-Semitism. From the absurd ‘hollow-Earth theory’, suggesting that an alien race has its headquarters in the middle of the Earth and that the entrance is the very spot where the Slovak, Hungarian, and Austrian borders meet, to the more sinister ‘world Zionist conspiracy’ or blaming the Roma for Slovakia’s economic situation, and the demonising of LGBT people, it did not take long for human rights activists and NGOs themselves to be demonised as “American agents” or worse. By 2014, this so-called ‘alternative media’ began to enter mainstream public discourse in their own special way.

While still referred to as ‘controversial’, these media sources have also started to be quoted in the mainstream press, a fact that would have been unheard of just a year earlier. The most prominent example is that of the so-called *Slobodný vysielateľ* (Free Broadcaster), an internet radio station and website, notoriously extremist in its content, which slurred the name of the short-lived radio station of anti-fascist insurgents during the Slovak National Uprising (SNP), during what was arguably the Slovaks’ finest hour, in August 1944. It also promoted, and largely assisted, in the victory of the openly neo-Nazi candidate for regional governor, Marián Kotleba, the head of LSNS, presenting him as an alternative to the current “establishment and state”, thus legitimising neo-Nazi leaders. Neo-Nazis and fascists are often guests on the radio, where they are introduced as experts on “Roma issues”, international affairs, human rights or even science.

Another example is the a monthly magazine *Zem&Vek* (Earth&Age), edited by the notorious conspiracy theorist and anti-Semite, Tibor Rostas,

which saw phenomenal success, with sales in its first three months rocketing by 500 percent. The biggest ‘success’, and a real cause for concern, is the extent to which these media sources present the extremist message in a more sophisticated way, making it harder to discern at first glance. By doing so, these publications reach larger parts of society. Public discourse has deteriorated considerably as a result. One could argue that it is in large part due to these forms of media that the anti-immigrant mood in Slovakia today is as high as in Hungary, although no refugee has sought to settle in the country.

It becomes increasingly acceptable, and easy to find online, discourses that are populist, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, or other similar rubbish, and social media helps to spread such messages. These media forms buy their reach to farther audiences, and as Facebook algorithms work in creating bubbles of people interested in similar issues, the audiences of ‘alternative media’ are becoming less and less exposed to the more traditional media. All the less so, when the traditional media is more and more often locked for only registered users – why would someone pay for content he or she thinks can be reached for free on online websites?

The situation is getting worse. Virtually any significant alternative to the existing mainstream media promotes fascist ideas. It is unexceptional today for Leftist, or even environmental activists, to appear in the same studio, or give an interview to the same magazine, as neo-Nazi leaders. In addition, more and more establishment figures, such as right-wing MPs, are starting to accept the ‘alternative media’ as mainstream media outlets, and regard their output as true journalism, instead of unsupported, incendiary opinion with no regard for professional standards or ethics. The attitude of the publishers is thinly veiled self-righteousness. They often defend themselves by citing freedom of speech, claiming that they are open to everybody and everything, and even accusing all those who refuse to appear in one of their ‘talk-shows’ of censorship. The effect on their recipients is the perversion of the very idea of freedom of speech, by maintaining that our country’s biggest problem is the ‘censorship’ of fascism and other extremist ideologies, in the media and by law.

Shrinking space for progressive voices

For those who want to build a tolerant, inclusive and just society, or for those who want to simply live, work and raise a family here, Slovakia's current trajectory is troubling. On the one hand, we face a situation in which conspiracy-prone and fear-mongering online platforms are gaining ground, while the mainstream media does not shy away from lowering their journalistic standards further, in order not to lose their audience (and sources of income) to 'alternative media'. The almost universally abhorrent mainstream media coverage of refugee issues during the events of last year is a case in point.

On the other hand, there is no political alternative formed on the Left, no party that could gather the protest vote. At the same time, since the 2016 elections, the leading opposition Liberal party has had no shame in claiming that their economic programme is essentially the same as that of the neo-Nazi's, and their leader has issued statements claiming that the neo-Nazi leader is "not really a neo-Nazi", thus effectively normalising and legitimising their existence and political activity. The signs are all there that mainstream politicians may be tempted into seeking tacit alliances with the neo-Nazis in order to secure votes in the future and who knows on what kinds of deals, or policies, these alliances will be built.

Neo-Nazis in Parliament, the failure of mainstream politics, no alternative on the Left, and a divisive media landscape with a proliferation of 'alternative' information, all culminate in creating a critical situation. While there is, objectively, a space and need for Leftist ideas that promote unconditional support for human rights, including economic and social policies, currently the Leftists have no vehicle, as any alternative to the existing system comes in a proto-fascist package. The Leftist voter is thus vanishing; either turning idle or towards radical groupings. The task for the progressives in Slovakia is therefore as glaring as it is pressing: to not let the public agenda be dominated by conservative forces attempting to, in various ways, curtail human rights, and to, by all means, reclaim public space for the diffusion of values for a more just society.